

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST BENEFICENT, THE MOST MERCIFUL

My Journey:  
From Chak 444 to  
Buckingham Palace

*Toaha Qureshi*

**Toaha Qureshi MBE**

Member of the Most Excellent  
Order of the British Empire



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From Chak 444 to  
Buckingham Palace**



**Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre**  
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FROM CHAK 444 TO BUCKINGHAM PALACE**

By Toaha Qureshi MBE

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*To Gulshan, Talha, Saad, Umar, Sarah  
and Amber and my wider family who  
have shared this journey with me in  
whole and in part*

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## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank God Almighty, for instilling in me the ability to put this book together and enabling me in whatever way possible, to promote global community cohesion that is sorely needed in the current climate of all forms of extremism, hate and phobia.

My gratitude to Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth II, for her encouragement to author this book during our conversation at Buckingham Palace during the Investiture Ceremony when I was conferred the Member of the Order of the British Empire.

I am also thankful to the various statutory bodies that partnered and collaborated with

I am eternally grateful to my family, particularly my wife, Gulshan, for putting up with me during the making of this book (and for all the years of marriage!). Perhaps, not often enough, do men show appreciation for the women in their lives; a wife, a sister, a daughter, a mother etc. It is without doubt that I would certainly not be in the strong position I am now, were my wife not supporting me. The countless years working the way I did, the months spent working on the book and reviewing things, meant that I could not give enough time to my wife and children. For that, I am truly sorry. I did what I thought was best in my “finite wisdom”, but I put trust in God that things would work out well – and they did. I am proud to say that without Gulshan, I would certainly not have lasted the course.

I cannot forget my beautiful grandchildren who gave me respite during the writing process when they would visit: Maria, Hafsa, Aliyah, Maryam, Naila, Adam, Ismail, Hannah, Zakariya, and Muhammad.

At times of reflection, Robert Frost’s iconic stanza comes to mind:



Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

I also thank my youngest son, Umar, for his dedication and time to achieving my goals. For the last few years in particular he has been working with me closely to get a number of things in order. In the beginning, Umar would type away as I spoke about the various topics I cover in my book. It is, of course, difficult to navigate through the intricacies of working for your father, but he has risen to the occasion more times than I would like to say. For all my books, he has been central to the editing, summarisation, photo selection, style and design amongst other things.

During the process, I tried to clarify my motive behind authoring this book. There have been several, changing over time. Perhaps the most personal reason to put these thoughts down but I wanted to ensure that my children, their children and so on, have some idea of who and what I was. During my own childhood, I often wondered about my father and ancestors, particularly where they came from and how they came to display such qualities, ideology, thinking and more. Unfortunately, my curiosity was often found unquenched. So, this is my contribution to my family in understanding where some of their traditions, beliefs, traits, and qualities (both good and bad!) have come from.

## Introduction

I come from a city in Pakistan called Multan, dubbed the City of Saints. I have known Toaha for decades and have met him several times in our shared city of Multan. It was when I visited London as Prime Minister of Pakistan, however, that I learned about his autobiography. At the time, I suggested to him that it would be much more beneficial for Pakistan and its people to write it in Urdu – My Jihad, so the average person may learn from his experience.

Having now read the English, perhaps I should have asked him to write them simultaneously! This book is an astonishing autobiography of a remarkable British Pakistani Muslim, Mr. Toaha Qureshi MBE. The author succeeds in informing the readers how all his identities, being a Muslim with Pakistani heritage, helped him to be a successful British national. This book is successful in reclaiming the word “Jihad” from radicals, violent extremists, and terrorists. “My Journey” is an extraordinary account of an unwitting family man on the path of rediscovery of not only his identity but also his religion. Toaha describes his fascinating journey from an aspiring engineer to a staunch community leader; this story serves up personal memories and achievements through his Jihad (struggle) of understanding new surroundings full of prejudices, discrimination, and racism. Nevertheless, instead of having “self-imposed exclusion” he works tirelessly to change the corporate management style by creating awareness of diversity, through his personal actions and education. His argument about immersing oneself into another society whilst retaining your own identity is both powerful and convincing.

As Toaha has rightly highlighted, Pakistan has suffered the most from the plague that is terrorism. We have lost not only military personnel but also civilians in thousands. I believe strongly in the

methods that Toaha has been promoting for decades: dialogue, education, rehabilitation. The biggest threats to the world are terrorism and extremism and under my premiership, the government was committed to fighting it. I have a certain policy to fight against terrorism through political dialogue with radicals and extremists, development, and deterrence for those who are on the fringe. For anyone convicted, I had hoped that rehabilitation could be used. Force is not the answer for everything terror related – something the world still has not understood.

During his pursuit for rehabilitation of Terrorism related offenders, he is conferred an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) from Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth II for his services to the community. For which the people of Multan, city of saints; are immensely proud. This is something that perhaps the Government of Pakistan would also take up in due course – we should celebrate our people now more than ever.

I would strongly recommend a read of this book as it reflects the changing realities of society towards religion and life. *“My Journey”* will prove essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the complexities of local to global extremism and to all those who want to understand the menaces of radicalization today. What is learnt from this book is the power of community led initiatives in the fight against terrorism, the true meaning of Islam in the backdrop of Islamophobia by media, politicians and society and a motivating story for those who want to be successful.

**Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani**  
Prime Minister of Pakistan

## Foreword

by Chaudhry Mohammad Sarwar – Governor of Punjab

Since meeting Toaha at a wonderful dinner back in 2007, I have found his work to be vitally important for our society. He has argued, time and again, for the inclusion of people from all backgrounds in mainstream politics. It is something I fundamentally agree with. I think it is very important that people, especially youth and minorities, have better engagement with leaders and government. The lack of inclusivity has resulted in a number of problems for the UK – London in particular has faced a real problem of extremism and radicalization of disenfranchised youngsters borne out of what one would describe as the so-called war on terror.

At the heart of the world's most trying times in the war on terror, Toaha lays bare his endeavours to tackle the international and domestic political issues of radicalisation and extremism from the grassroots to the strategic level. He illustrates well his accomplishments in creating awareness and designing diversionary and preventative programmes to counter extremism before the 9/11 and 7/7 atrocities in partnership with various statutory bodies. This work results in him and his family suffering at the hands of violent extremists and terrorists as it challenges the status quo on the ground. Although initially being labelled a "scare monger" as the London attacks had not taken place, he was forced to take special safety measures at the advice of the authorities.

It is an eye-opening account of his "jihad" against certain segments of his own community and the authorities to enable them to understand and realise the nature and scale of the problem stemming from political radicalisation. He shares intimate, first-hand knowledge on the build up and fall out of the 7<sup>th</sup> July and 21<sup>st</sup> July

suicide bombings which rocked the UK to its core. He is indeed an intriguing figure, with a unique perspective, with desires and principles worth listening to and learning from. William Blake once said: "Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but foresight is better, especially when it comes to saving life, or some pain!" With this in mind, it is perhaps the failings of our own British government towards the Muslim population, particularly when it comes to the double standards in foreign policy that has led to the problems that the Muslim community has faced. If the authorities had heeded Toaha's warnings and followed his concept, the dangerous volatility of radicalization would perhaps have simmered. Missed opportunities and chances are told in this gripping, never-before-heard detail; giving readers insight how the Muslim communities living in the UK started counter radicalization work before 9/11 and 7/7.

Having had the pleasure of launching his Urdu autobiography when I was Governor of Punjab at Governor House, Lahore, I know that this ground breaking memoir will captivate readers to challenge and change their perspectives on one of the most difficult times for British Muslims. "My Journey" shatters the conventional perception of community involvement in stepping up where others failed. The author offers a strikingly candid journey through the defining decisions of his life.

**Chaudhry Mohammad Sarwar**

Governor of Punjab, Pakistan

First Muslim Member of British Parliament

# My Son, Honours are Earned not Given

“

*Knowledge is in the end based on  
acknowledgement.*

”

Ludwig Wittgenstein

**February 12, 2010**

*“The moment was approaching when my name would be called. My heart skipped a beat and my breathing was accelerating. I could not believe that I was about to receive one of the highest awards for my services to the community from the highest person in the land, the Queen. Then, suddenly, from out of the blue, a familiar and soft voice echoed in my head, ‘Son, honours are earned, not given’.”*



I stood within the palace doorway, struck with awe and disbelief, gazing into the expansive, glamorous ballroom. My knees were shaking, and my heart pounded loudly; I felt as if it would jump right out at any moment.

The atmosphere inside Buckingham Palace at the Investiture Ceremony felt surreal but electrifying. At a little distance ahead of me, I caught a glimpse of the serene and familiar face of Queen Elizabeth II, one of the most revered and respected women on the planet. She was wearing a beautiful pastel green dress, looking graceful and radiant as always. Her elegant glasses rested firmly on the bridge of her nose, and her lustrous silver hair was gracefully combed back, revealing a wise forehead.

Her Majesty stood commandingly over the throne beneath a giant, domed, velvet baldachin, which had been used at the coronation of Durbar, Delhi in 1911. Her escort, the Lord Chamberlain, stood to her right, elegantly dressed in his pristine and imperious outfit. Standing upright and proud, he read out, one by one, the name of each recipient of the New Year's Honours and their achievements.

To my right, the orchestra of the Coldstream Guards played lively music. Five members of The Queen's Bodyguards – members of the Yeomen of the Guard, the oldest military corps in the world, stood tall on the dais in their ceremonial uniforms. A *Gurkha* officer was visible, standing firmly to her left.

To my right, the guests were seated in rows, showcasing their elegant attire. I was so proud because somewhere among them sat my wife Gulshan, my eldest son, Talha, and my youngest daughter, Amber. Tears welled in my eyes as I reflected on the enormous support my family had given me leading to this auspicious day and moment and how they had prepared me for every aspect of the day's events.

*'Don't forget the drill, Abbu Ji, you mustn't forget the drill,'* Talha's words echoed in my head persistently.

*'Approach the Equerry in Waiting. Go forward when you hear your surname. Bow, walk towards the Queen, make sure your toes touch the dais, make a little conversation. Her Majesty will stretch out her hand – take it, shake it and remember to let it go and then walk backwards. Bow to her and then exit to the right and walk slowly out of the ballroom. Walk past the*



*second usher. Meet the staff who will take your medal back. They will box it and then return it to you and then you walk back to the ballroom.'*

*'Yes, Talha, yes! I think I've remembered all of that.'* I convinced myself that I could remember it all.

The moment was approaching when my name would be called. My heart skipped a beat, and my breathing began to accelerate. I could not believe that I was about to receive one of the highest awards for my services to the community from the highest person in the land. Then, suddenly, a familiar and soft voice echoed in my head, *'Son, honours are earned, not given.'*

The face of my late father, Muhammad Shafi Qureshi, flashed fleetingly in front of me. He was a tall, upright man who was part of the British Indian Army and was captured by the Japanese as a prisoner of war (POW) in the Second World War. He had an imposing persona and many a village child was in awe of him. Although from the outside he seemed to be as hard as nails, he was as soft as marshmallow inside. He was a kind-hearted, humorous, and simple man. He did not crave any luxuries in life but was always content with the very basics... a single chapatti and homemade pickle with a glass of lassi was his idea of heaven on earth. He was a man of conscience and principles. He always treated men and women with equal respect even in the days when girls were not highly regarded in my culture. When my sister was born, he provided the villagers with a grand dinner to celebrate the joyous occasion, contrary to local culture.

This did not escape my developing consciousness. I could see something important in his fairness, and forward-thinking nature. He was a moral being.

He always believed in getting success and riches through hard work and was strongly against bribery and corruption. Even at the end of his army tenure, when he was offered 50 acres of land, he respectfully refused the offer.

The adults and children would always await his return to the village on leave from the army with impatience. Upon his arrival, our house became full every night with the villagers who gathered around us at the end of their long, hard, working day. They would listen to him with rapt attention as he recounted tales of his work, what he had

witnessed and what he learnt along the way. He was some kind of celebrity. As one of the most respected members of the village, on most nights after his return, the village people would ask him to act as judge and jury in resolving their disputes. I used to watch with pride and awe as, one after the other, people brought their problems to him and, how he gave intelligent and mature solutions which everyone agreed upon. As I sat in regularly during those meetings, my father encouraged me to speak in front of assembled village people without shyness and hesitation, and this greatly boosted my confidence and public speaking. Decades later, I am doing the same thing because I had acquired skills and values from dad. I, too, am asked by people to settle issues including family matters.

At the age of 13, we finally moved from the village in Lyallpur to a bigger city, Multan, he would influence me being invited to gatherings and conferences to deliver speeches for which I won the top prize in a school competition at the city level. The winning speech, which he loved, was about the life, generosity, and humanity of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH).

Every year there used to be a military ceremony was organised in the summer, and my father would dress in his army uniform and wear all his colourful medals. One day, while watching him get ready, I asked who had given him these medals and why.

He bent down, took me by the shoulders, looked deep into my eyes and said, 'Son, honours are earned not given; never forget that.' This cryptic response never left me.

Those words were now ringing in my ears. I also remembered that last peaceful look on my father's face just before he passed away in 2007 and, as tears welled in my eyes, I found myself whispering: *'Today is not my day Dad, it's yours. I love you and miss you.'* That was an important formative phase for me. My father's actions, principles, values, and community spirit were clearly important, and they were not lost on me as I waited during the award ceremony.



I suddenly realised that I needed to return to the present, the award ceremony. I continued to await my turn as the names were being read out. The line ahead of me became increasingly shorter. My mind wandered back to the day when the unexpected news arrived. It was a typical London day with the usual British grey skies in November 2009 when I received Gulshan's call, interrupting one of my afternoon meetings.

'Are you alone?' she asked.

'No, your image never leaves me,' I replied playfully.

'Well, this is important. Are you with someone?' she asked again with haste.

'Yes, I am in the middle of a meeting.'

'Okay. Better get rid of whoever you're with and call me back then,' Gulshan said.

The phone went dead with a sort of finality. The abrupt end signalled that I needed to give her attention.

I called her as soon as I was free, to check whether everything was alright.

'Nothing to worry about,' she said. 'There is an envelope with something important for you.'

I anxiously said, 'Is that what you called so urgently about? Just open it! What's the big deal!?'

'Well, it looks quite official. Some sort of stamp and it's quite thick. You should come home ASAP!'

This mystery letter sounded quite peculiar, maybe important. So, curiosity mixed with the desire to unravel the mystery pushed me to finish work early by cancelling my remaining afternoon meetings, and hurried home.

By the time I got back it was early evening and the entire family had gathered around the dinner table. Their faces glowed suspiciously; I couldn't decipher anything from Gulshan's usual tell-

tale face. This rare occasion of being stumped by them added to the oddity of the situation and the letter in question. Their presence, curious glances, and air of expectancy filled the room.

Seeing everyone in this way stirred my anticipation, and I tore open the envelope with the zeal of a young child receiving their birthday toys.

I pulled out the letter inside. It carried the stamp of the *Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood*, part of the Lord Chamberlain's Office. It was written in the traditional typeset of the Queen's English, ending with 'your most obedient servant' and it bore the signature of a Lieutenant Colonel.

It gloriously described my services to the community of Stockwell, London and elaborated why I was to be honoured to become a Member of the Order of the British Empire, frequently referred to as an MBE.

I felt the blood drain from my face and my voice faded to almost a whisper as I held the letter and slowly faced my family.

'They are giving me an MBE at Buckingham Palace,' I croaked.

'Giving you a what, Abbu Ji?' My youngest son, Umar, grabbed the letter to read it

'They're not just giving it to you just like that, you deserve it! You have worked so hard!' Gulshan shouted ecstatically. 'Oh, my goodness – how wonderful! I always knew you would get something like this one day!' Gulshan began to weep with happiness.

Apparently, questions had been asked, information was gathered, and a nomination had been made in great secrecy.

Gulshan grabbed the letter from me and went through it line by line.

'The letter says you have to acknowledge your willingness of the receipt of the honours in writing. Shall we tell Her Majesty that you will accept the honours, then?' Gulshan smiled with pride

'Absolutely!' I breathed deeply, still in utter amazement at receiving the letter. I then realised that I would have to keep the news about the Honour quiet. Mum was the word until it would be officially announced towards the end of December 2009. Those were to be the longest six weeks of my life.

The scheduled time arrived for the publication of the lists. The

local newspapers published the Queen's honours list for 2010. A flood of calls started pouring in from friends and colleagues from all over the United Kingdom. Notable among the earliest calls was one from Catriona. 'Congrats Toaha', she said. Catriona is a dear, longstanding Scottish friend of mine, a staunch Christian with years of supportive work in interfaith dialogue and the building of bridges across various sections of the community. We had worked together in Stockwell in the wake of the 7/7 bombings in London. She worked with me in bridging the divide between various faiths, in particular, linking Islam and Christianity. As we talked, I recalled the time when she turned up one night with a huge baton in her hands to guard the Islamic Centre in Stockwell from a possible hostile gathering in retaliation for the London bombings. She was like a part of my family. Her son, Gabriel, contrary to the British customary handshake, would usually crave a 'desi' hug whenever we met.

'Thanks, Catriona. It's an honour for all of us,' I said.

'Yes, indeed,' she cooed. 'I wonder how they found out about you?'

'No idea. It is still a mystery to me. I don't know how this system works. But they must be pretty clever,' I replied.

'Sounds so. Seems as though Big Brother is watching you.' She laughed and hung up.

Two weeks later, I found out that the 'clever system' turned out to be Catriona herself.

As the day of the ceremony drew closer, a boisterous conversation ensued one evening at the dinner table. The whole family was extremely excited.

'I am going to drive you to the Palace. I can't miss one of the world's most famous places,' Talha announced emphatically

'Abbu Ji,' my youngest son added, 'can you believe that you're going to walk into the palace where the world's top presidents, prime ministers, kings, queens and diplomats have been received? Sometimes, Her Majesty the Queen invites other high achievers to her Summer Garden Party each year as well. The Queen's Grandfather, George V, initiated it in 1917 and later added recognition categories to include services to art, science and literature and voluntary sectors to the awards.' He reeled out the fruits of his

research.

Sarah, my eldest daughter also jumped in. 'Abbu Ji, guests are seated in the ballroom and recipients are received in the stateroom above the grand staircase. Did you know that the ballroom was once the largest room in London?'

'Well, all that sounds impressive. You guys have been doing your homework really well!' I exclaimed.

'Yes, Abbu Ji, we have, and we're dying to know who's going with you to the Palace,' Saad, the second son of my five children, said in a more sombre tone.

A long-drawn silence settled in as they all looked at me soulfully for an answer.

'Well, we know that only three guests are allowed in terms of protocol. So, it can be only three out of you six. Choose for yourselves,' I said in a grave tone Patently aware of the impending disappointment for some of them if they were not selected.

'Have you thought about inviting Catriona?' Gulshan asked.

'Hmm. How could I forget her?' I immediately jumped up to call her.

'Thanks for inviting me, Toaha,' she said cheerfully, 'but it is your day. You have been warranted by Her Majesty and you should celebrate it with your family. Take the three lucky ones in your family to Buckingham Palace. I'm happy for you all.'

'So, there you go,' I told my family. 'Now you can have draws or duels or whatever you wish to do,' I joked.

'But what if you had to choose, Abbu Ji? Who would you choose?' Saad retorted.

I took a quizzical glance at all of them. Gulshan sat at my right hand. Her eyes met mine and I caught the glimpse of a smile tracing her lips. Talha sat next to her. He looked vibrant and smart in his new tuxedo. Next to him was Saad, looking at me intently. Sarah and Amber, both of my daughters, hugged each other. Umar sat at a distance with his dinner knife poised. The expectancy was palpable.

I felt my eyes becoming wet as warm tears welled up. A strange feeling began to envelop me. These six people had given the best of their lives to me. Gulshan, my wife, and soulmate for the last twenty-two years, stood by me in every situation, through thick and thin. It

wouldn't be difficult to recollect the sleepless nights and long days feeding my multitude of guests in Bradford and London where she stood beside me in lean times, giving up the best years of her youth. Can I ever really reward her?

Talha, Saad, Umar and Sarah had assisted me like teammates since each of them reached the age of ten, carrying out my crazy tasks and dealing with my tantrums. They received guests, served food, photocopied things, arranged chairs, and cleaned floors. Amber was the youngest and was the apple of my eye.

The eldest two had worked relentlessly on any free days they had and had now matured, both personally and professionally. They too had experienced their fair share of my tribulations.

My family had faced threats from gangs and extremists as they worked with me, travelled with me, and moved in and out of different accommodation at short notice. How could I have managed to stay on my feet and survive all the blows dealt me without their support? I almost broke down in tears. I hung my head down in sorrow.

'Abbu Ji, don't worry about which three to choose. We already worked it out for you... Mum, as she deserves it more than any of us, then Talha bhai, being the eldest, and of course Amber, being the youngest.' Saad put his hands on my shoulders and comforted me. They had already solved the most difficult of questions for me.

'There won't be three, but four of you, and you know who it's going to be?' My voice was still emotional.

Gulshan looked into my eyes and nodded her head reassuringly. 'Yes, we know, your dad will be there as well. But he doesn't need an invitation.'

I nodded my head in affirmation. My father had never left me. This was his moment too. For me, this was the culmination many years of toil, hard work, resilience, loving and giving to people, organisations, and the community. I owe much to him.



The waiting ended with my name being called out and I came back with a jolt into the present. I walked, as I had been directed, towards Her Majesty. Then it all suddenly became real.

It was an unfathomable moment when Her Majesty took my hand and awarded me the MBE. In my wildest dreams I could not have imagined standing in front of the British Head of State, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, receiving recognition and a medal of honour.

Suddenly, a sense of pride enveloped me. Here I was a small person who lived in and had been brought up in a small Pakistani village, Chak 444, humble beginnings, now standing in Buckingham Palace and receiving an Honour from Her Majesty the Queen in recognition of services rendered to British society. That moment was hard to define; I was unable to overcome my myriad emotions. I remembered the sacrifices of my parents, the hard life they had endured to educate and raise me, my mother's prayers, the love and support of my beloved wife, and the pride of my children.

As the euphoria of achieving my Honour started to settle down, I remembered that Her Majesty had asked me whether I was writing a story of my work, my goals, successes, and the milestones I had accomplished or wanted to accomplish. I thought long and hard whether I should put pen to paper about my life story. I then remembered that my whole life had been a Jihad, a struggle to find truth and happiness – not only for myself, but also for all those around me. Her Majesty's question became the motivation I needed to tell my story, not as an autobiography, but as a motivational testament to you my esteemed reader and companion. So, in essence, I owe this book to Her Majesty the Queen, Elizabeth II.





# Beyond Boundaries

“

*The believers are but brothers,  
so make settlement between your  
brothers. And fear Allah that you  
may receive mercy.*

”

**Quran, 49:10**

*“As I indicated earlier, at the start of this trip, I was warned by Imtiaz that the atmosphere may become turbulent among the delegates so I should be prepared. However, he believed I could manage the proceedings well because of my vast experience.”*



## The Importance of Dialogue

One terribly cold December morning in London, I received a call from Imtiaz Gul, the Executive Director at the Islamabad based security think tank, Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) to chair the first meeting of a Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Committee (PAJC) under the aegis of the project *Beyond Boundaries phase III*, to be held in Kabul on 15 December 2017. I had delivered numerous lectures at the CRSS for their *Pakistan Centre of Excellence (PACE)* initiative in partnership with the Dutch government, and he thought it would be an excellent idea for me to join the CRSS *Beyond Boundaries* programme as an International Expert on conflict resolution, and to chair their conference in Kabul.

## The tale of my Jihad (struggle) from a Pakistani village to the Palace

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) funded a project for track 1.5/II dialogue entitled *Beyond Boundaries* from late 2017 through a consortium of Saferworld, CRSS, and the Afghan Organisation for Economic Studies and Peace (OESP). The objective of this project was to improve and sustain the political relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The first two phases involved enhanced dialogue from a committed group of Pak-Afghan influencers, including parliamentarians, security experts, retired civil and military bureaucrats, civil society and media leaders, The focus was on key bilateral issues for policy recommendations and engagement with the key stakeholders in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has helped to inform changes in government policy and public perceptions aimed to improve the relationship between the two neighbouring countries.

The project established the Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Committee (PAJC) which consists of parliamentarians, security experts, civil society, and business/media representatives from both sides. PAJC has held several highly successful meetings in Kabul and Islamabad. I chaired the meeting in Kabul on 15 December 2017, which then led

to a breakfast meeting with Mr. Abdul Rauf Ibrahimi, the Speaker of the Afghan National Assembly. A detailed meeting, followed by lunch with the CEO of Afghanistan, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah was also held.

I had travelled from London to Islamabad and joined the delegation for our visit to Kabul. As soon as we landed, executive cars were brought up to the aircraft to ferry us to the VIP Lounge. As usual, Afghan hospitality was in abundance. We were driven to the beautiful Serena Hotel, situated right in the heart of Kabul. By the time we checked in, very heavy snowfall had started.

Pakistan and Afghanistan have always had a tumultuous relationship. One of the underlying causes of this has been the Durand line, a 1510-mile-long border which was established during the British Raj between Sir Mortimer Durand, who was the Foreign Secretary of colonial British India at the time, and the Emir (Leader) of Afghanistan, Abdul Rehman Khan in 1893. This is referred to as a frontier line between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which the latter disputes. Hence Afghanistan opposed Pakistan's induction into the United Nations. Despite being an Islamic Republic, and non-European allies in NATO as well as members of SAARC (South Asia Association Regional Cooperation), both countries were at each other's throats for one reason or another. Both have suffered the most in the so called global 'War on Terror'. The former Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, once called Afghans and Pakistanis 'inseparable' and 'twin' brothers but in reality, the situation was quite dismal due to misunderstandings and foreign influence, thus creating hatred. I believed this hatred could be changed into love and respect by enhancing greater understanding through people2people dialogue. I also believed that it was necessary for the leadership to make concerted efforts to create this sense of belonging in both nations, particularly among women and youth, as this could guarantee peace and stability in the region.

Afghanistan has always been a country of international significance and importance as it has been the route to connect Central Asia to the combined India. Apart from serving the same purpose, it has been an integral part of Oil Pipeline projects from the Caspian Sea. These projects were of strategic importance to Pakistan

due to its geographical location and its very special relationship with the emerging super power, China. If both countries worked hand in hand, it would bring political stability and economic development in the entire region, and thus relief for the common people. However, the historical baggage both countries carry has seen many opportunities being squandered.

Many analysts claim that India played a crucial role in creating a wedge between Pakistan and Afghanistan due to its *Cold Start* doctrine against Pakistan. But I strongly believe all sides have been guilty of sabotaging mutual peace efforts, the Afghan Jihad and the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban have all been guilty.

In the run up to the creation of Pakistan, the residents of the frontier side declared an unqualified alliance with Pakistan. On the Af-Pak frontier, the population of the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at the Afghan border, reached almost 50 million. These people had very close religious, cultural and trade ties. Unfortunately, the trust deficit among the two nations is increasing day by day. Therefore, I emphasised people2people dialogue because of my understanding of the love-hate relationship between Northern Ireland and Britain.

After the 7/7 London attacks by suicide bombers of Muslim background, I was asked to take a group of people to Northern Ireland on a study tour. While there, I met many people who were imprisoned and had been tortured due to their Irish Republican Army (IRA) affiliation. Part of this trip was to find comparisons between Catholic/Protestant Irish youth and Muslim youth; understand how the Good Friday Peace Agreement became possible; and what influenced staunch enemies to sit around one table to find a formula to work together.

A pivotal moment in Northern Ireland's history was the IRA's assassination of Lord Louis Mountbatten, 1st Earl Mountbatten of Burma and former Viceroy of India, and the attempted assassination of the Iron Lady British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. There was a time when the English hated the Irish in such a way that they displayed banners in their windows which read 'No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs'. However, people2people dialogue achieved miracles through religious/community groups denouncing violence and

sitting around the peace table. When the Catholic and Protestant leadership believed that enough was enough and took ownership of efforts aimed at bringing peace to the region, this encouraged and empowered the communities at large to come together in countering the menace of violence through dialogue.

In seeking to make comparisons, it must be noted that while Northern Ireland is part of Great Britain, Pakistan and Afghanistan are two independent states. However, the common factor is that they contain two similar communities which hate each other. That notwithstanding, hatred could be defused by the people through developing the right understanding will power and confidence. At the same time, governmental institutions need to get together, and military establishments need to partner with others, media organisations need to educate the masses accurately, while businesses need to influence economic development in their respective countries. The example of Northern Ireland informs a critical question - if communities in Northern Ireland could work together to bring peace, why can the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan, who have numerous commonalities, not do the same?

During my trip to Ireland, I visited a rehabilitation Centre for the ex-members of IRA. When I asked their reason for choosing violence to get what they wanted, the answer was that they felt very strongly that London was an invader and an aggressor in their land.

Improvements in Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral relations remains the main objective of *Beyond Boundaries*. A multi-pronged approach has been adopted to lobby and act as a pressure group of influential individuals to work with leaders of both governments. More meetings of officials should lead to progress in mutually agreed contentious areas.

I believe that people in both secular and religious organisations need to join hands in this noble cause of finding peace.

## **Joint Declaration of Policy Recommendations First Meeting of PAJC**

I chaired the first meeting of Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Committee (PAJC) in Kabul on 15 December 2017 during this trip.

The Pakistani delegation was headed by Mr. Rana Afzal Khan, Member of National Assembly, PML-N leader, and Parliamentary Secretary for Finance. Other delegates included government officials and top military brass included: Ms. Shazia Marri, Member of the National Assembly, PPP; Mr. Shibli Faraz, Senator, PTI, and Chairman, Senate Standing Committee of Commerce; Mr. Murtaza Wahab, Senator, PPP; Dr. Shoaib Suddle, Former IG Police and Federal Tax Ombudsman; Lt. Gen.(R) Asif Yasin Malik, former Secretary for Defence; Mr. Qazi Humayyun, former Ambassador; Mr. Mian Sanaullah, former Ambassador; Ms. Seema Ilahi Baloch, former Ambassador; Mr. Tahir Khan, senior journalist and Editor NNI; Mr. Rehman Azhar, senior journalist Express TV; Mr. Kashif Abbasi, senior journalist ARY News;; Mr. Zahid Hussain, senior journalist; Mr. Sarfraz Raja, senior journalist GEO News; Ms. Faiza, Secretary General, Pakistan Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce & Industry (PAJCCI); Mr. Imtiaz Gul, Executive Director, CRSS; and Mr. Aized Ali, Project Director, Beyond Boundaries, CRSS.

The high level sixteen-member Afghan PAJC delegation was headed by Mr. Abdul Qader Zazai, Member and Secretary of Parliament and other members of Parliament and members of government. The other members included: Mr. Mirwais Yasini, Member of Parliament and former Deputy Speaker; Mr. Khalid Pashtoon, Member of Parliament; Ms. Rangina Kargar, Member of Parliament; Ms. Elay Ershad, Member of Parliament; Mr. Salim Khan Kunduzi, Former Governor Nangarhar and former Deputy Minister of Agriculture; Mr. Asif Nang, former Governor Farah; Mr. Danish Karrokhil, senior journalist and Head of Pajhwok News; Ms. Najiba Ayoubi, senior journalist and Head of the Kileed Group; Mr. M. Rafi Sidiqi, senior journalist and Head of Khurshid TV; Mr. Haji Younes Momand, Vice President Afghan Chamber of Commerce & Industry



(ACCI); Mr. Abdul Qadeer Bahman, Head of International Chamber of Commerce (ICC); Mr. Naqibullah Safi, Secretary General PAJCCI; Ms. Meena Wardak, Director, Trade and Investment ICC; Mr. Mozammil Shinwari, Advisor to CEO on Trade and Economics; and Ms. Asila Wardak, Diplomat having served for Afghanistan at UN.

As I indicated earlier, at the start of this trip, I was warned by Imtiaz that the atmosphere may become turbulent among the delegates so I should be prepared. However, he believed I could manage the proceedings well because of my vast experience. I must admit that the robust performance, effective contribution, and openness of the delegates, demonstrated their maturity, commitment, and sincerity to bring peace. During the meeting, there were some moments when I had to intervene to avoid the discussion going off on a tangent. But for the much of the session, the evaluation was made in a professional manner which influenced participants on both sides to perceive comments as constructive contributions. Generally, we had some light moments and some very serious moments too.

Before starting to chair the seminar, I undertook a comprehensive review of the previous PAJC meetings so that I could inform myself about the progress made so far. The PAJC members welcomed the start of the process which involved various working groups addressing hindrances to their bilateral relations. The recent exchange of visits between, Kabul and Islamabad, particularly consultations between Directors of General Military Operations (DGMOs), were appreciated by the members, who hoped the current relative restraint on both sides would bode well for bilateral relations. They urged both governments to continue the course of constructive engagement with future generations in mind.

Members of the PAJC agreed to a monitoring mechanism by setting up the PAJC Monitoring Group to follow and track the implementation of policy recommendations. Several recommendations were made and the PAJC called upon both governments to do the following:

- a) convene a meeting of the Afghan Pakistan Transit Trade Coordinating Authority (APTTCA) as soon as possible to address pending transit trade issues.

- b) immediately resume bilateral trade talks, including recently imposed regulatory taxes on Afghan exports to Pakistan.
- c) expedite and facilitate implementation of the Scholarship Programmes for Afghan students.
- d) facilitate completion of Pakistan-funded projects in Afghanistan and provide all necessary support.
- e) To encourage the establishment of an alumni of Afghan graduates from Pakistani universities who are now working in various fields of life in Afghanistan.
- f) revisit the visa regime to facilitate and improve visa-related issues

To improve bilateral relations, it was further recommended that:

- i) Youth exchange programmes should be organised to youth from both countries to visit Pakistani and Afghan families as guests.
- ii) Journalists' short exchange programmes should be organised for better understanding of each diverse perspectives in both countries.
- iii) Cultural programmes could be organised to facilitate performances by prominent singers and other artists.
- iv) Various Sindh Government initiatives approved by the Chief Minister of Sindh because of the *Beyond Boundaries* phase II Karachi visit in January 2017, could also be followed up with the Sindh government and Afghan government.

v) The Forum for International Relations Development, a UK based conflict resolution think tank, will offer scholarships for tuition fees to five Pakistani and five Afghan students for undergraduate and post-graduate British qualifications through the School of Economics and Law (SOEL), UK. The CRSS and OESP will recommend and lead the process, while the final selection will be made by SOEL, UK. However, applicants in both countries must meet relevant UK Visa and Immigration requirements.

During the session, several members from both sides of the PAJC agreed when I said that emphasis on education and cultural awareness was an important aspect of the development of future generations. Therefore, a scholarship programme for the two countries was initiated. Senior members of the Afghan delegation and the Pakistan delegation were pleased with this development.

## **Meeting with the CEO of Afghanistan Dr. Abdullah Abdullah**

The PAJC delegations met with the CEO of Afghanistan, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah on Saturday 16 December, at 12:00 noon, in his office which ended with a traditional lavish Afghan lunch.

The hour and half long meeting was very frank and open. Dr. Abdullah was highly commended for his continuous support to this project and for creating time.

The Pakistani delegation recalled with grief that 16 December marks the third year of the tragic attack at the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar by terrorists killing hundreds of innocent children. Everyone present at the meeting remembered the sad event by observing a one-minute silence and offering prayers for the young people martyred and their aggrieved families. Dr. Abdullah welcomed the *Beyond Boundaries* delegates by saying:

*'I warmly welcome the CRSS and OESP and the distinguished Pakistani group comprising parliamentarians, civil society members and senior media persons. This is a very diverse group, we need to strengthen it, improve it and take it further to a more people-to-people level. I do support your track II system and will continue to do so. Sometimes, the gravity of politics affects people-to-people contacts, but efforts like yours should continue. You have come here at a time when we are in general looking at better relations. After your Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa's visit in October, we received excellent proposals from the Pakistan side. We have mutually started a process of working groups, including trade and economics. We look forward to working together with Pakistan and improving the bilateral relationship. Let me request you to share your views in a very frank and candid manner, and I will respond to your questions as candidly.'*

The head of the Pakistani delegation, Rana Afzal Khan, Member of the National Assembly, spoke first from the Pakistan side. He said:

*'Thank you for welcoming us, we are very pleased to meet you. We have a number of parliamentarians with us as well as retired military and civil senior officers and senior media persons. We have had very useful and detailed discussions among the two groups with the emphasis on trade and commerce among other important issues. We have come up with a joint declaration of policy recommendations, which we will share with you. As the Finance parliamentary secretary, I can assure you that on the trade side we are very seriously working on the resumption of the Afghan Pakistan Transit Trade Coordination Authority (APTTCa) meeting. As you mentioned, we have made good progress after the COAS visit, as five working groups are jointly working now. We have 3000 scholarships for Afghan students, especially including 100 for women. One of Pakistan's most prestigious institutes, LUMS, has also announced 100 scholarships as well. On the visa regime issue, we were informed by our embassy here that 1600 visas are issued to Afghans daily from Kabul and another 1600 from other consulates. There are still some issues due to which Afghans face hardships; we are trying our best to improve upon these procedural issues.'*

Ms. Shazia Marri, Member of the National Assembly said:

*'There is a deficit of trust that exists between our two countries. We need to work on this deficit of trust and work together to jointly improve our bilateral relationship for the betterment of our people. Being a female*

*parliamentarian, I would like to make clear that there is a strong need for the women of both countries to work together closely, whether that is female parliamentarians, female journalists, female civil society members and leaders – we need your help to introduce such initiatives.'*

Former Ambassador, Ms. Seema Baloch, showed her dismay at security and political factors taking precedence over more critical issues. She said:

*'Security and political issues should not hamper trade relations; we should move forward to improve bilateral and transit trade; which in turn will improve bilateral relations.'*

Senator Murtaza Wahab and I had a meeting of minds based on what he said:

*'We should build on the commonalities of our people. We need to focus on common grounds, particularly culture, trade, education, civil society and more that can be celebrated.'*

Senior journalist, Kashif Abbasi and Zahid Hussain, shed light on the role of media practitioners to highlight such wonderful initiatives rather than selling bad news.

I said: *'Being the neutral international expert in the group and coming to this dialogue as Chair, I will, I hope, encourage both sides to continue the dialogue, keep on meeting, discussing all contentious and non-contentious issues. These issues we are facing can only be resolved through dialogue. We must learn from the mistakes of other nations, who have been around for much longer than we have, yet they manage to get along despite at one time being bitter enemies. We must create a mechanism for dialogue to support areas such as rehabilitation to counter radicalisation and terrorism.'*

Lt. General (R) Asif Yasin was clearly impressed with Dr. Abdullah:

*'You are a mover and shaker, a go-getter. We have lots of hopes from your office to get things moving in the right direction. We would expect your indulgence in our policy recommendations, and generally in improving relations with Pakistan. You should indulge at the highest level.'*

Former Ambassador, Qazi Humayyun, said:

*'You are the most experienced person to be dealing with us – with your previous assignments and positions – you are best placed to move Pak-Afghan relations forward. I would like to request that the much-anticipated visit to Pakistan is still awaited and should be made soon. We would once*

again like to request you to visit Pakistan. On a lighter note, you need to find a balance between your visits to India and Pakistan.'

Senator Shibli Faraz spoke on the international exertion in South Asia which had ultimately led to the current situation:

*'We are fighting against a common threat, which is terrorism. Unfortunately, we have been involved in a war which was never ours to begin with; we were forced and misled by other countries to engage in this war. The most important causality has been the economic development. We need to address this, and for the benefit of the people of both countries it is imperative that we concentrate on economic development. We need to concentrate on education as well for the betterment of youth of both countries, so I am happy to see that scholarships have been offered at high level and at ground level. We need to engage in a common way forward. Your peace is our peace; your destiny is our destiny. We need to move forward and improve relations.'*

Dr. Shoaib Suddle, former Inspector General of Police and federal tax Ombudsman, expressed disappointment as he gave reference to the last meeting held with the CEO:

*'In our last meeting with you in November last year, you gave us some breaking news that you would be visiting Pakistan; but we are still waiting to welcome you in Pakistan'. He said that the APTTCA meeting had not taken place so far, and the delay had been on the Afghan side.*

*'We would like to request you to convene this APTTCA, so that the mechanism on transit trade can be reviewed and moved forward.'*

Dr. Abdullah thanked the Pakistani delegation for sharing their frank and candid points of view. He told the delegation:

*'The 16 December APS terrorist attack was a tragic day for us as well, because we can feel the pain of the aggrieved families. It makes it incumbent upon us to work together for Counter Terrorism. Security is a common concern for all of us. While we are having opportunities to connect, we also need to tackle terrorism jointly.'*

Referring to the waiver of duties and tariffs on imports of medical equipment, he remarked:

*'I thought it was resolved. It looks silly; even if there are no invoices, the equipment should still come. I will look into it again and promise to resolve it.'*

He instructed his Advisor, Mozammil Shinwari, to work with the

Pakistan embassy and the relevant ministries and authorities for the earliest resolution.

Mr. Shinwari briefed the CEO after the last meeting of APTTCA held in Pakistan. It is now Afghanistan's turn to hold the meeting. Unfortunately, almost a year and half later, the meeting has not taken place. He further informed delegates that the Pakistan side had sent its proposal for more than a year, but nothing had moved from Afghanistan side. The CEO then vowed:

*'I assure you we will work it out and resolve it ASAP.'*

Dr. Abdullah remarked:

*'I agree with women's forums such as women parliamentarians' cooperation and also in other fields'. He added that visas should not be a problem: 'The kind of good work that you are doing as a group and as track II project; we need to remove those'. He agreed that economic development and cooperation was very important: 'Trade issues altogether need to be addressed as top priority.' He further stated: 'I agree with you, we don't need to stop at security alone, we need to move on other issues such as trade and education. We are grateful to the Pakistan government for the scholarships, even to LUMS for their scholarships. Education of our youth is very important to us.'*

He concluded his speech by saying that the security issue vis-à-vis the Taliban was not an issue of mechanism. But there was an impression that in dealing with the Taliban, the political will to address this issue was elusive.

*'I thank you all for your efforts. We will start a mechanism of follow-up here. And I promise you that the longstanding issue of my visit to Pakistan will also be resolved.'*

Senator Shibli Faraz, who was also the Chairman of the Senate Standing Committee of Commerce, presented and shared the joint declaration of policy proposals with the Afghan CEO. After the meeting, Dr. Abdullah hosted both Pakistani and Afghan delegations for a working lunch.

## Visit to Kardan University and Karwan University, Kabul

During the visit of the Pakistan Afghanistan Joint Committee (PAJC) to Kabul, as part of the university interaction planned for the group, two to three members each from the PAJC visited Karwan University and Kardan University over the weekend. The Pakistani speakers were Mr. Rana Afzal Khan, Member of the National Assembly, Ms. Seema Baloch, former Ambassador, and Zahid Hussain, senior journalist, and author. The Afghan speakers included Advisor to CEO Mr. Mozammil Shinwari, former Governor of Nangarhar, Salim Khan Kunduzai, and Ms. Elay Ershad, Member of Parliament. I attended as the neutral International Expert and Chair.

The *Beyond Boundaries* PAJC members were welcomed by the Director of Kardan Research Centre. More than fifty students, male and female, and some faculty members attended the session. After being greeted with smiles and hugs, we were ushered into the seminar hall. The meeting schedule was now catching up with me and I was getting tired. I considered the interaction with students an important part of the series and was happy to see the variety of students there.

## An interaction at Kardan University Kabul

Mozammil Shinwari set the scene for the meeting by briefing the audience on the project – the partnership between CRSS and OESP through *Beyond Boundaries*, its need, and outcomes.

Rana Afzal Khan expressed his gratitude to the government, the Afghan people and institutions like Kardan University who had welcomed the delegation with such warmth. In his opinion, peace and stability in Afghanistan was as important as it was for Pakistan which could only be achieved through sincere efforts on both sides. *'We are brothers and can resolve our differences by sitting around the table!'*



*Afghanistan is a sovereign country and we do not wish to interfere in its matters in any shape or form,' he insisted.*

As an advocate for dialogue, I was asked to share my thoughts on what the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan needed to do to ensure that dialogue remains a critical component of peace efforts in the region. My first point was to remind the students that they were a vital asset for the future, not just for Afghanistan but the for the region, too. Therefore, they needed to unshackle themselves from the historical baggage they have been laden with and support initiatives for dialogue. As a British observer on the outside looking in, I asked the audience to learn from history and think outside the box. I said,

*'Please remember the magnitude of hostility and animosity that France, Germany, Britain, etc. were locked in. It was to such an extent that they ended up having two world wars and lost millions of people in the process. Despite all that hate and anger, these countries have managed to form a European Union, EU market, the Euro as a currency and NATO. This unity has helped in the developing of human rights, peace, democratic political systems and economic stability in the region, for the most part.'* I said that we needed to learn lessons from European experiences of war and peace. Pakistan must not see Afghanistan through the Indian prism and must continue to root out all sorts of violence and terrorism, particularly on the Northern borders. The same rule applied to Afghanistan with regard to anti-Pakistan terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan and leveraging the relationship with India when the Af-Pak relationship became rocky. However, for the desired outcomes including long-lasting peace and security to be achieved, both countries must implement the following *Five Prong Dialogue* formula for peace:

**1) P2P = People to People, 2) G2G = Government to Government (politicians), 3) A2A = Army to Army, 4) M2M = Media to Media, and 5) B2B = Business to Business.**

**P2P** would allow for cultural immersion and a celebration of similarities/commonalities instead of attacking each other where differences abound.

**G2G** would promote key policies and initiatives to support the political narrative for peace.

**A2A** would prevent rogue elements from attacking the other's homeland. This will foster cooperation on very important matters of counter extremism and radicalisation.

**M2M** will enable media personalities to provide information that would foster a narrative of peace and love rather than aggression.

**B2B** would support the economic development of the countries and support **G2G** dialogue in pushing for trade agreements and other goals.

It transpired that many of the people either were born in Pakistan, had studied in Pakistan, or their parents had lived in Pakistan as refugees. Elay Arshad, Member of the Afghan Parliament, agreed that terrorism is an issue that both countries face and have to deal with:

*'Such dialogue and interaction with youth is very important as it creates opportunities for people-to-people contact and improves awareness and perceptions on Pak-Afghan relations.'*

The session ended on a high note with students feeling more positive and believing that they had been given important information through the interactive Q&A session, and mementos were presented to speakers.

## **Interaction at Karwan University**

The Chairman/Vice Chancellor, Professor Sayed Andish, greeted and welcomed the delegates. He was very pleased to be hosting an important discourse for his students especially because he had been trying to host something similar to promote peace. I was quite impressed by the students as they made the interaction very

meaningful through very serious questions and comments.

It was a breath of fresh air when Mozammil Shinwari told participants about the results achieved by the project in the last phase, such as movement and concessions on the refugee issue and positive changes in the visa regime. He said that Pakistan was a major trade partner for Afghanistan but lamented that recently the volume of trade had decreased. He had high hopes of turning the tide in trade due to activities like this. Notwithstanding this, he informed the students about the dialogue held between the two PAJC groups the previous Friday and were apprised of the Policy recommendations, notably, noting important measures taken to improve bilateral and transit trade, education, and scholarships.

I informed the audience about the scholarship I had offered as an extension to the dialogue of *Beyond Boundaries* to give five students from both Afghanistan and Pakistan the opportunity to expand their minds, educationally and culturally. It was a great pleasure for me to be in Kabul, as this was my first visit to Afghanistan. I told the students that both Afghanistan and Pakistan had suffered tremendously because of terrorism, every other day, there was a suicide bombing attack. I also informed them that we had had very useful dialogue and meetings under *Beyond Boundaries*, which was an excellent initiative. I added that peace was particularly important but emphasised that peace would not come without paying a price. I argued that we had already paid huge price. I reiterated the importance of my 'Five Prong Dialogue' formula for peace.

Zahid Hussain said: *'Now, I see a remarkable change and improvement, the country is moving forward. Nothing gives me more pleasure than to see young male and female students going to schools and universities.'* He further added, *'I would like to hear your perceptions and views about Pak-Afghan relations.'*

In response, Salim Khan Kunduzi said: *'We have lot of similarities like culture, religion, values etc. Pakistan has given home to our refugees for about four decades now; even I have lived and studied in Pakistan.'* He further added, *'Geography we cannot change, we will always be neighbours. We have to find ways to bring the two countries together, remove distrust and misperceptions. I would request you as youth to talk mostly on peace, on the way forward for joint peace progress.'*

Some serious questions were raised by the participants during both interactions.

'How much power does the civil government of Pakistan have to take decisions on security and peace?'

'Are Pakistan-Afghan relations state-to-state or between non-state actors? Why are Afghanistan's relations with India a problem for Pakistan?'

'Why is Pakistan supporting the Taliban?'

The panel's responses included:

*'We are not here representing the government. If we combine the questions, the thrust is accusations and mistrust. You have to understand the fact that we have gone through the same tragedies of terrorism. Yes, we have made mistakes, there is historical baggage, but we have also played a positive role alongside Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. There exists a huge gap for understanding the reasons that have created the distrust. The Pak-Afghan relations should not be based on political and security levels; it should be more focused on people-to-people, trade, education, cultural exchanges. We have to move from geo-political to geo-economic interests.*

*'We have to stop blaming each other. If, according to your accusations, there are Afghan Taliban sitting in Pakistan, similarly Pakistan blames Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's relationship with India should not affect Pakistan. Afghanistan is an independent and sovereign country but at the same time its soil should not be used by any other country for involvement and attacks in Pakistan.'*

With an air of finality, I added: *'We are here to convey that we have to use this opportunity to improve people-to-people contacts. As ordinary people we need to have good relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Let us start talking about peace and harmony among people, particularly the youth of both countries.'*



# A Role Model

4 August, 1969

“

*There are two kinds of teachers:  
the kind that fill you with so  
much quail shot that you can't  
move, and the kind that just gives  
you a little prod behind and you  
jump to the skies.*

”

Robert Frost

*“The words on it read:  
Work, work and only work and Unity,  
Faith and Discipline.  
‘If you learn to burn the midnight oil  
and don’t compromise on being the  
best, then you boys will stand no  
parallel in life.’ He would always  
reiterate in his deep voice, ‘The world  
has taken its shape carved by the  
hands of those people who never gave  
up. Never, ever give up!’”*



**M**y father worked for the Pakistan Army which he had joined after independence. Before Partition, he had worked for the British Indian Army and had been held captive as a prisoner of war in World War II by the Japanese for four years. This experience had left deep mental, psychological, and physical effects on him. However, he also received a letter of bravery for his services from Queen Victoria's cousin, General Auchinleck – Commander in Chief in British India.

Whenever I think of my father, I remember some very momentous events in my life including school. It was the annual All Schools Competition Day and the setting was the City of Lyallpur (later named Faisalabad), Pakistan. I was representing my school in the Speech Oratory competition, and it was results day for the County. The whole audience erupted with spontaneous applause. My legs were trembling. I had butterflies in my stomach and my heart was thumping. However, I guessed that I was not the only one who was feeling anxious at that moment. From where I sat, I could see a similar expression on the face of the tall, graceful, and charismatic headmaster, Muhammad Hussein Warraich.

The city of Lyallpur was founded in 1816 and was named after Sir James Broadwood Lyall, Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab, who was the grandfather of Mark Lyall Grant, former British High Commissioner to Pakistan.

The competition was over, and we were waiting for the results to be declared with bated breath.

The Commissioner of Lyallpur, seated on the stage as a chief guest, stood out in his black suit and chequered tie. More than four hundred students, teachers and notables were clapping eagerly after each result was announced.

The speaker announced the winner for the third prize. It wasn't me, but one of the students from an elite school of Lyallpur. Then the second prize was announced, and again it wasn't me. My heart was racing. A frightening thought was circling forcefully in my mind. I was either the winner or I had lost the trophy this year and therefore lost my school's premier position in the region for producing the best orators. That was a distinction my school was really proud of. My heart almost sank at the prospect of losing out to another school. I began to



understand what was holding Mr. Warraich, our headmaster, on the edge of his seat. I hoped and prayed that I wouldn't let my school down and glanced wistfully at him hoping and wishing that I would not disappoint him.

Then a voice rang out. 'Finally, let me announce the trophy winner for this year,' the speaker announced, smiling, and holding the microphone tentatively, pausing briefly to raise the tension in the room.

'We have a dark horse this year. Nobody predicted he would win the laurels this year in one of the toughest competitions in the region. Gentlemen, this year's trophy goes to Toaha Bashir Zulqarnain Qureshiiiiii!' he shouted at the top of his voice.

A deafening applause followed. I almost fell off my seat in excitement. I could see a huge grin spreading across Mr. Warraich's face as he slumped back into his seat with relief. I was deliriously happy and proud and felt that I was walking on air as I went to receive the trophy.

I clambered onto the stage as the whole audience gave me a standing ovation. Mr. Warraich was then called up to the stage. I received the heavy silver trophy with both hands from the Commissioner, with Mr. Warraich standing by my side. The Commissioner gave me an ear-to-ear smile and patted my shoulder.

'Shabash (well done), you have a great future ahead, son.' As he stooped to hand me the trophy he whispered words of congratulations in my ears. Then he straightened up and I saw his right hand slipping into the pocket of his coat. When it came out, I could see three rupees clutched in his fingers.

'I am giving you all I have right now.' Then he hunched over and squeezed my shoulder. 'This is appreciation of your fighting spirit.'

Dumbfounded and speechless, I stood there. I looked at Mr. Warraich and noticed his eyes were also welling up.

I said to myself, finally, we had made it, together. I had made Mr. Warraich extremely proud, and I could see that he was proud of me. That was my moment of glorious victory. I did not know whether my victory was due to hard work, my father, or good luck. I was aware of my village roots.

I am from Chak (Village) 444. Chak No. 444 GB (Gogera Branch) is a small village with approximately one hundred families. It is located

to the west of the main road linking Tehsil Samundri to the District of Lyallpur, now Faisalabad.

My family was notable among the several farmer families in the village as we owned a few parcels of land which had been inherited by my grandfather.

Chak No. 444 GB, like other villages of Punjab, had a very distinctive character. The houses, except for a few large brick houses belonging to well-to-do landowners, were built of clay and almost all were flat-roofed. Each house was hidden behind high clay walls on which, dung cakes for fuel were left to dry in the sun.

The narrow, irregular lanes, which were muddy during the rainy season and covered in deep dust at other times, often served as channels through which dirty water flowed from the houses. On the outskirts of the villages were ponds of rainwater used for the livestock. Like every village, Chak 444 also had two small mosques.

In Chak 444, the day starts early with the call to prayer from the village mosque and would end at sunset. A few people had kerosene lamps, but the rest burned oil in small tin lamps. Except on moonlit nights, there was little movement outside the courtyards after dark. Paths connected the scattered villages but, though there was constant traffic between villages, few strangers were ever seen. It was common for the villagers to travel to far off places.

Chak 444 was half an hour's brisk walk from the main road coming from Samundri. After leaving the main road and climbing down a steep embankment, one walked westward over uneven, barren terrain, crossing the narrow boundaries of the ploughed fields, past the simple village graveyard, and ditches dug out for the mud used in building village houses, through more fields, until finally reaching a water well under a clump of trees.

Nearly all the houses looked similar with the exception of the few brick-built ones dotted around, exuding the wealth of their owners. Any hope of electricity was dim, literally, as the nearest electricity connection was in a small town many miles away. Manually operated fans therefore were a common feature in our locality; some were operated by foot while others were made from wicker and beautifully decorated by the women of the house when they relaxed at night after a full day's work in the fields and home.

Only the school building in our village signalled the arrival of 20th century architecture in an otherwise prehistoric village. This Government High School was first occupied in 1952 and was a building of striking contemporary design. A huge gate stood at the entrance to the school, behind which beautiful multicoloured orchids with numerous flowers grew on both sides of the brick laid pavement, which meandered up to the imposing veranda. A giant Roman column was the primary support for the upper floor. The walls of the lower floors were constructed from marble, and the windows were made of grey glass. The school comprised spacious classrooms, two modern science laboratories, a large group instruction room and a modest school library. All in all, the building seemed out of place within the village but was a Godsend to us pupils.

Although the beauty of the school building was not in doubt, it only suddenly had a breath of fresh air and life only after the arrival of Mr. Warraich's.

Mr. Warraich was the torchbearer of knowledge in this far forgotten land. He was a tall man of light brown complexion in his mid-forties, with a thick handlebar moustache and an imposing personality, which made him stand out in a crowd. He was a graduate of The Punjab University, Lahore, and he taught English. Through him, I became familiar with Shakespeare – and particularly Hamlet, which we studied earnestly with Mr. Warraich until we arrived at that most famous expression:

*To be, or not to be, that is the question.*

Indeed, that was a very pertinent question and one that I neither understood nor could have hoped to have understood at the time. Mr. Warraich explained Prince Hamlet's dilemma within the play. *'The question is, 'is it better to be alive or dead? Is it nobler to put up with all the nasty things that luck throws your way, or to fight against all those troubles by simply putting an end to them once and for all?'*

Mr. Warraich was the first person in my life who taught me about struggle and how to fight all the bad luck that could come my way. He showed me that dreams that were dreamt with wide open eyes were the ones which would have the most chance of becoming reality. He showed me that life was not going to be a bed of roses, and that every good thing requires hard work and that negative things should be

stopped or reversed.

Mr. Warraich's arrival was my salvation and a sweet kiss of life to a school lacking in leadership and energy.

His presence galvanised the whole school to a competitive spirit, inspiring everyone to achieve more. It seemed that with his presence, flowers started blooming with brighter colours and the school wore a cleaner, spick and span look. Students who had never thought about achieving anything in their lives started 'thinking big' and it took less than two years for the school to become the champion in the regional competitions for hockey, football, and public speaking. The school also edged forward in the race to win coveted scholarships for the first time.

Mr. Warraich was the leading light in bringing respect and recognition to *Chak No. 444 GB*. He mingled with the students wearing the militia-coloured uniform and conducted morning assembly always pointing to the big bronze plaques on which quotes of Quaid e Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, were engraved. The plaques stood tall and proud, glistening in the morning sun on the wall in front of the sports ground. The words on it read:

*Work, work and only work and Unity, Faith and Discipline.*

'If you learn to burn the midnight oil and don't compromise on being the best, then you boys will stand no parallel in life.' He would always reiterate in his deep voice, 'The world has taken its shape carved by the hands of those people who never gave up. Never, ever give up.!''

I cemented Mr. Warraich's words in my memory, and they became permanent. Never had I met such a profoundly inspirational, honest, and hardworking leader. Even at that incredibly young age, there were qualities in Mr Warraich that I saw as important. He became my role model, my hero. Throughout my life, his actions and his words have never left me. I suppose that, holding onto the object and importance of Mr Warraich's words prepared me for surviving the thick and thin of life events.

Apart from the wonderful presence of Mr. Warraich, my childhood was like that of any other child.

My father told us horrible tales of his captivity and how he was tortured and beaten, which gave him nightmares for years after his release. The intensity of his stories was such that he would often

become teary eyed, and he would fall silent; it left huge psychological marks on me and since then I have always been a fierce opponent of war. I never wanted anyone to go through the same traumatic experience and the feeling of horror that I experienced through my father's stories.

These childhood memories and experiences have made me advocate a '50 Year No War' pact between India and Pakistan. This would be so that the coming young generations of both countries never experience the same feelings that I had to go through.

Although my father only used to come home during his vacations, the time he spent with us was wonderfully high-quality time. He brought us up with regimental discipline and always visited our school to enquire about our progress. He also used to bring us goodies such as fountain pens, not only signifying his interest in education, but also creating a tradition that has carried on in our family as, since then, we have presented every guest that visited us with a pen.

My father's military obligations placed extended responsibility for my parental nurturing on my mother. She filled the absence of my father with extreme responsibility of duty, knowing that she had to play the role of two people. We were four brothers and one sister, so she had her work cut out. During the day she would work hard on household duties, ensuring we ate well and attended school with clean clothes. At night she would prepare a small lantern for us to complete our school assignments whilst she settled with us to darn our clothes or decorate a wicker fan. When we were stuck on some homework, she would help us to decipher what had been taught. As the time drew close to bedtime, she would warm up some milk for each of us and make sure we drank it before sleeping. Like Mr. Warraich, my mother reminded us how important study was and how we must all work hard, as God helps those who help themselves.

She was without doubt the first teacher in my life. Her contribution towards helping my siblings and me to complete our formal education was immense. Like all mothers, her only wish was to see us succeed in our lives.

My parents meant everything to me; their efforts, sacrifices and prayers all go towards the man I am today.

# Pardon Me, 'Brother'

January, 2000

“

*That's when I first learned that it  
wasn't enough to just do your job,  
you had to have an interest in it,  
even a passion for it.*

”

Charles Bukowski

*“My life in Pakistan, after marrying Gulshan, was moving on at a constant pace. Against my expectations, Gulshan, who was a British citizen, was ready to embrace Pakistan and life there. She took no time in learning everything related to household management in line with the Pakistani norms and traditions. Her interest in the Pakistani way of life was also a source of happiness for my ageing parents. Based on my three years Engineering Apprenticeship, I secured my first job in Pakistan’s power and electricity sector and was working in the Electrical Engineering department as a full-time employee. Although I was constantly busy and consumed by my job, the mere fact of my parents’ happiness, linked with Gulshan’s rapid adjustment to this new way of life, was an encouraging sign for me.”*



Slipping three times in one week on black ice had left many bruises on my face and body, I had to tread carefully.

As I walked, I could feel my feet sinking into the cold slushy ice, also seeping through the torn stitches of my shoes, soaking my socks, which would eventually freeze my feet. The chilling cold and heavy snowfall made me feel as if my blood was freezing in my veins.

I stopped walking for a moment to catch my breath. The continuous snowfall was forcing me to shake snow off my puffer jacket every few minutes. The intensity of cold had reduced the usual hustle and bustle around the city, rendering it a deserted place. My breathing became difficult, like a sharp pain in my chest as if I was being stabbed with an icicle. On top of all that, my head started to feel the piercing cold, and a headache was building up.

To make matters worse, I had to take precautions while walking on the granular ice. Although difficult, it was still easier to walk on compared with the deceiving, glassy layers of black ice.

While heading towards Brook Street, an employment agency, I recalled yesterday's event which gave me goose bumps.

The road was built on a slope and was covered by tall, majestic trees, as if bowing down to a greater being. Although there was no fresh snow on the road, patches of black ice lurked here and there. I thought crossing this road was going to be a major problem for me. But there was another major hurdle yet to be crossed, a hurdle which could shape my life and future. This hurdle was the first day of my *very* first job in Bradford, also known as Little Pakistan, in the UK.



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way of life was also a source of happiness for my ageing parents. On the basis of my three years Engineering Apprenticeship, I had secured my first job in Pakistan's power and electricity sector and was working in the Electrical Engineering department as a full-time employee. Although I was constantly busy and consumed by my job, the mere fact of my parents' happiness, linked with Gulshan's rapid adjustment to this new way of life, was an encouraging sign for me.

It was my friend and colleague, Riaz, who threw the first stone in the peaceful pond called life. I had a job, my wife, family, and friends, so what more was there to have?

'Toaha, Brother, let's go to Lahore. I've received an interview call from a Saudi company. I am thinking if I get this job, I will not only be able to visit the Holy Land (Makkah and Madinah) but also earn a better livelihood for my family,' said Riaz over a cup of tea.

He wasn't wrong. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's (Pakistan's late PM) pro-Gulf States policies had made a substantial number of Pakistanis think along the same lines. Due to these policies and the labour flight from Pakistan into the Gulf States, a new, wealthier middle class was emerging in Pakistan.

When I told Gulshan to join me on my journey to Lahore, I spoke more about the prospect of visiting Lahore to motivate her rather than about the interview. After we got married, this was our first visit together to Lahore. The highway from Multan to Lahore was full of scenic beauty including trees, farms, and fields. Gulshan's company and friendship made the time spent on this long road trip fly by. Riaz was supposed to appear for his interview in the morning and had pressed me to accompany him to apply for the job as well. The interview was held at a remote office in a Bungalow in Lahore and somehow my name had also been added to the list of interview candidates. The interview wasn't difficult it seemed pretty easy with most of the questions based on practicalities and electrical engineering trades. Riaz, though, was unhappy with his interview as he complained that he was asked more theoretical questions than practical ones. When the results came out, the unexpected happened – it was I who was selected for the job and not Riaz.



'I am extremely content and happy with my life and job in Pakistan, and above all, my family is around me,' I told my parents, speaking at the top of my voice, and even arguing with them for a couple of hours. They were also joined by Gulshan who was sitting in front of me.

'But this is a wonderful opportunity that could give you valuable international exposure,' said Gulshan who, against all my expectations, was in favour of this job despite knowing that she would be staying alone in Pakistan, although she was also supposed to join me later in Saudi Arabia.

'Son, when someone gets a job in Saudi Arabia, it is not merely a job, it is also an invitation to the Holy Land,' said my father, keeping his assuring hand on my shoulder. I noticed his moist eyes, full of emotion. My father had, for the past three years, been sending applications to apply for Hajj (Pilgrimage in Makkah), yet he was constantly struck by misfortune in this regard. Keeping this in mind, I wanted to resist going to Saudi Arabia, yet I couldn't muster up the words to do so.

It was exactly one month later that Riaz, along with my brothers, took me to the airport for my flight to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.



It was the decade of the 80's that turned the page on Saudi Arabia's economy. With the exploitation of never-ending oil reserves, the country transformed from a developing state to one of the most economically progressive states in the region. Pakistanis in the country were dominating trades and skills such as auto mechanics, barbers, ironsmiths, cooks, and labourers, and had earned a

reputation in the community. The engineering sector and medicine, among other white-collar professions, also included a considerable number of Pakistanis.

I was struck by the respect that locals gave to foreigners, especially from the West. Most top posts were filled by Europeans and Americans. Where people of Western origin were held in high esteem and called *Siddique (Friend)*, the Indians and Pakistanis were called *Maskeen (Poor)* and treated as such. My workplace, named *Al Rajhi Al Sudais*, covered a total area of 76KM<sup>2</sup> in the Al Quassim region of the country. The blue-collar staff in the firm comprised Bangladeshis, Indians, and Pakistanis. But out of all the shocks I experienced, the one with the most impact in turning my ordinary job into an extraordinary one was the moment I met Tony.



Tony, a tall, bald, green-eyed European, was a senior engineer at the factory. He was known for his rude and harsh behaviour. Even though I found out later that he had a *laissez-faire* attitude, along with the junior staff, the local Arab workers were also unhappy with his temperament. It was Tony's ability and expertise to manage and operate the control room machinery in situations of breakdown and emergency that helped him keep his job. In the case of any faults or significant issues with machinery, everyone at the factory looked up to Tony to solve the issue – giving him the spotlight during major breakdowns. Senior management felt that this had left them in a hostage situation, since they couldn't resolve matters without him.

My first meeting with Tony was far from pleasant. He ignored me to avoid shaking my hand and pretended as if he was really busy. His annoyance may well have been linked to my appointment in the same area of operations. Although I tried to forget the incident as soon as possible, I was surprised to learn that the purpose of bringing me to this area of operations was to replace Tony.

'Toaha, we are looking to you to help us replace Tony. He is

arrogant and hates Pakistanis the most. If you don't do anything, all of us may lose our jobs,' said Ramzan, the most experienced factory manager.

It was my idea to have a teaching model that appealed to everyone; it made sense that there were several people who were capable of doing important jobs so that the company did not get stuck. I wanted to provide training and give them a chance to succeed.

Call it destiny or coincidence, within two weeks of my appointment, there was a major breakdown in the factory.



It was a sizzling June afternoon when I noticed that one by one, all the factory workers started moving towards the factory cafeteria. The operation on the factory site had stopped.

'What happened?' I inquired while wiping the sweat off my forehead.

'There seems to be a major breakdown in the site machinery. I don't know how much time it will take.' It was Yaseen, a Bangladeshi foreman, who replied.

It was only after two hours that the General Manager was successful in bringing Tony to the site after numerous requests and efforts. I also reached the site as soon as I could, and saw that Tony was also there. He condescendingly looked at us, ignoring me as I attempted to offer support, and went into the central room. I followed him in.

'What are you doing here?' asked Tony, as if he was annoyed by my presence.

'Just doing my job, trying to assist you, I replied.

'A lion preys and hunts for himself without any assistance,' he mocked as he showed me the door.

Almost three hours went by without any respite, and it seemed as if Tony was unable to solve the issue. The plant manager asked

me to visit the site again. Realising the complexity of the situation, with Tony on site and my last attempt, I asked the manager to accompany me as well.

As we reached the room, we witnessed Tony doing several things with the control panel, which was ultimately not at all helping to solve the problem. It was obvious that he was unable to diagnose the problem, yet he was trying to look busy. He also looked angry the moment he saw me but didn't utter a word because of the presence of the plant manager. We stood by for another hour, and it seemed as if nothing would change, adding to Tony's frustrations.

'Tony, do we understand anything about the problem?' I gathered courage and asked.

'What do you think I have been doing for the last few hours? Can't you see?' replied Tony in a tone which showed annoyance

'Yes, we can see what you're doing.' I gathered courage again. 'Wouldn't it be better to use the drawings of electrical circuits for this control panel? It may save us time.'

'Tony knows what he is doing', replied the manager, leaving me in an embarrassed state.

But it was after a further hour that the plant manager lost his patience.

'Tony, I think you are tired. Let us see what Toaha has up his sleeve. After all, it is his job to assist you,' the plant manager told Tony, who unwillingly, had to succumb to the plant manager's order and step aside while throwing his tools on the floor.

This was my time to prove my mettle. I opened the drawings and started analysing the machine's flow diagram. At this point, I was also recalling the golden words of Mr. Khan, my mentor in the electrical engineering department, who used to say, 'If you need to understand a man, judge him by his family and friends (his company). Whereas if you need to understand a machine, use its map (or the flow chart diagram).'

I spent close to half an hour reading the flow chart diagram and testing a few circuits. Meanwhile, several staff had gathered on site, making it look like an event with an audience, all of whose eyes were firmly stuck on me. Tony, on the other hand, was staring at me hoping for me to fail.

'Chief, I think I have diagnosed the problem. The problem seems to be in Circuit 21, it's overheating and causing the smoke and tripping,' I announced excitedly. 'It shouldn't take too long to fix it.' The plant manager sighed in relief.

'Then what are we waiting for? Fix it!' the manager ordered.

'I don't agree with Toaha. The issue seems complex, and it may take a couple of days to fix,' protested Tony in a heavy voice, while raising his arm.

'No worries, Tony. Let's give Toaha a shot. If he fails, we'll have to wait for a couple of days, anyway,' replied the manager.

Within thirty minutes of me working on the machine and replacing one of the circuit boards, it was up and running. Tony's face was red, he was fuming.

Within a week of this incident, Tony left his job. Peter Jones, the Chief Engineer, said he could continue if he would change his attitude.



My decision to leave Saudi Arabia was taken in complex circumstances.

During my time at the firm, I had made a special position and name for myself. Also, I was quite popular among the staff in the factory because of the prompt service they were getting after Tony's departure. I was also lucky enough to perform the pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah. But working and living away from my parents and wife was exceedingly difficult for me to deal with on a long-term basis. I longed to visit home since phone calls were not enough.

But then one day something happened which not only changed the path of my life, but also stamped my departure from the country.

It was a pleasant April day when. While leaving my office, I saw an executive scolding and insulting Ramzan. He peppered him with foul language and obscenities. I couldn't resist going towards

Ramzan, whose face was wet and teary, but a Sudanese guard stopped me from reaching out to him.

The next morning, I found out that Ramzan was asking for his overdue promotion, upon which the Director mercilessly fired him on the spot. Unable to bear the shock of this whole episode, Ramzan suffered a cardiac arrest and was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit at the hospital.

I was wondering for the next two days whether people like Ramzan, who worked round the clock in Gulf Countries, had any rights at all. Did the amount of time and effort he put into his work not count for anything? Would I also ultimately suffer the same consequence in years to come? Did the executive need to fire him on the spot? Did Ramzan deserve to end up in ICU for merely asking for what he was due? Was there any justice in the world? These thoughts kept me occupied for some time.

The next morning, we heard that Ramzan had lost his battle for life at the hospital. His heart just couldn't keep up with it. At work, there had been no change and no acknowledgment of Ramzan's passing away. Without his family, a next of kin and minimal friends, he was buried, and time moved on.

It was his death which made me resign from my job and return to Pakistan.

# Rebirth in Little Pakistan

“

*My sun sets to rise again*

”

Robert Browning



*“The first generation, in their desperate attempt to hold onto their roots, started importing Imams/Ministers of Religion from Pakistan. They wanted their children to be immersed into the Eastern Muslim values and principles based on teachings of the Holy Quran. Flats were converted into mosques which, with the passage of time, expanded into multi-storey buildings. Gradually the search for identity dwindled into sectarianism and tribalism. Every sect had its scholar, mosque and its unique interpretation of right and wrong. The question of identity reared its head and British Born Confused Desi (BBCD) became common. Bradford became Little Pakistan - a separated city almost at war with itself.”*



There was a deafening silence in the room, and he was staring at me with a poker face.

'Toaha, I am still not sure why you would like to go to the UK,' I heard him saying for the fourth time.

'Well, ahem...' I cleared my throat and repeated my answer – also for the fourth time.

'I am going to the UK to settle there with my wife who is a British national. I also intend to study over there and to work in the engineering sector.'

I was present in front of the Entry Clearance Officer (ECO) at the British Embassy in Islamabad. Gulshan and I had decided to settle in the UK, so I applied for a spouse visa. Success with the interview was a prerequisite for travelling to the UK but it felt as though my interview had slipped into an interrogation. It was irritating for me to repeat myself as the officer was putting this question to me again and again.

My ECO was a Caucasian in his early forties, with an oval face. Curly, thick, dark blond hair covered his forehead, and he had small ears which were almost hidden behind his hair. Behind his heavy spectacle frames were almond-shaped, dark blue eyes, while his curved eyebrows were thin and narrow. He had a large nose and a full-lipped mouth. Bushy sideburns, an arched moustache and an unshaven face made him look messy.

'Hmmm.' He mumbled something as his fingers continuously played with the pencil in his hands.

'So, tell me, what is it really that you want to do over there?' I heard him asking again.

'I will repeat myself,' I said in a stern voice. 'In short, I will start a family, study, and work.'

'Hmmm.' His eyes remain rested on the ground without a trace of emotion. 'Okay. Your interview is over. Please go and collect your result from the lobby,' he said in a cold monotone voice, also devoid of any emotion. This was now going to go only one way.

I walked out of the room and slowly stepped towards the lobby with butterflies in my stomach. After waiting for half an hour, the result was what I had expected. My visa was refused for the reason

that my preliminary purpose for entering the UK was *not* to start my family life. That was my first interaction with the British High Commission, which turned out to be quite unpleasant. Later, I came to know that ECOs were well equipped with loads of reasons to refuse entry in the UK. However, in my second attempt I was granted entry clearance.

On 13 January 1989, I boarded the plane at Islamabad for my flight to London's Heathrow Airport. Soon after landing in London, I headed towards the city of Bradford – a metropolitan area of West Yorkshire in Northern England, famously known as *Little Pakistan*.

Entering Bradford with the intention of starting a new life was nothing less than a rebirth.

It was a tiring five-hour journey from London to Bradford. Or perhaps the jet lag from a nine-hour long flight got the better of us. The car whizzed out of London and the panorama changed from tall buildings and glass offices to meadows and farmhouses. The greenery rested well on the eyes. These new scenes were so vibrant and gave a new meaning to life. Approximately a hundred miles away from London, I was told that we were entering Northern England which was famous for its extremely low temperatures. The chilly wind testified to its reputation, and I could feel my body becoming colder. The country, from Sheffield northwards, was almost covered with snow.

I was told that Bradford was the sixth largest city in the UK, located just a few miles south of Ilkley Moor and the Brontë country. With its apparently diverse culture and industrial heritage, outsiders were lured into going to Bradford and visiting attractions like the National Media Museum.

Bradford had useful links with neighbouring Leeds, Harrogate, York, Manchester, Huddersfield, the Pennines, Yorkshire Moors and the Brontë countryside, and was not too far from the Lake District.

The landscape changed a great deal before we reached the city. This area was hilly with several scenic moors. It almost resembled Murree, my birthplace, and the tourism capital of Pakistan, which was 6000 metres above sea level. I couldn't make out much of the city, though it seemed quite big. I peeped out of the window, and it seemed as if lots of doll houses were hugging each other. The car

circled around the streets and then stopped in front of Gulshan's home. The terraced houses looked like igloos buried in the snow.

I took a long, deep breath and stepped outside the cab. A frosty gust hit my chest, making my eyes water. The chilled breeze blew through my heavy overcoat. It was the kind of wind that I never experienced before in my life. I tried to rub my arms to keep them warm and took a step toward the house. Not realizing that my leather shoes were unsuitable for walking on the snow, I slipped and hit the ground face first. I lay flat on the footpath, feeling the hardened snow against my cheeks.

'Welcome to Bradford,' I heard Gulshan say in a soft voice. She quickly came running to my rescue, giggling. She extended her hand to help me get up and warned, 'Beware of the black ice. You won't get a second chance.'

I looked at her, totally absorbed. It suddenly hit me that I was in a completely alien land with unknown weather and, most likely, unknown people. Gulshan would be the only compass that could guide me in the times to come. I took her hand and got on my feet.

My first day in England had started.

My arrival in Bradford was far from smooth sailing. It brought with it a number of pains – both physical and psychological.

When I stepped out of our home for the first time after settling down, the whole city was covered in snow. It was constantly snowing. It felt after a fortnight that I had not spotted the sun which, being from Multan – the hottest city of Pakistan. Bradford was divided into wards, and I later found out the city was deeply split on racial, religious, and linguistic grounds, with pockets which were almost ghettos.

Bradford gained importance due to its textile manufacturing, known in some parts as the wool capital of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

During the mid-20th century, Bradford, just like other parts of Northern England, bore the brunt of challenges including deindustrialisation, ultimately leading to social unrest and economic deprivation.

After World War II, migrants came from Poland and Ukraine, and in the 1950s from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The British Raj was

recovering from the shock of World War II and needed an unlimited supply of labour to rebuild the country from the ashes left by the Luftwaffe. In the beginning, labourers from Gujrat, Kharian, and Azad Kashmir thronged into the textile mills of Bradford, inspiring an exodus from the local families and *biradris* (clans) from Pakistan. Although there was cultural diversity, a divide still existed. It took a while for me to figure out how and why there was a dichotomy in the city. Most of the Pakistani workers swamped the area around the textile mills. They would multiply British pounds into Pakistani rupees, which motivated them to work for two to three shifts a day. The pull of the 'almighty Pound' lured the cousins and the rest of the family from Pakistan on a 'get rich quick' track. In two decades, thousands flew in and settled in Bradford.

Bradford treated its 'alien' arrivals in different manners. Polish, Hungarian and Ukrainians were easily absorbed into the local culture and blended in well. However, the South Asians and Muslims stuck out like a sore thumb. The first generation had no idea about this divide as they were too busy making money and counting their Pounds Sterling. However, they started feeling the pinch once the second generation started interacting with the local population in schools, workplaces, restaurants, and recreational spaces.

The first generation, in their desperate attempt to hold onto their roots, started importing *Imams / Ministers of Religion* from Pakistan. They wanted their children to be immersed into the Eastern Muslim values and principles based on the teachings of the Holy Quran. Flats were converted into mosques which, with the passage of time, expanded into multi-storey buildings. Gradually the search for identity dwindled into sectarianism and tribalism. Every sect had its scholar, mosque, and its unique interpretation of right and wrong. The question of identity reared its head, Bradford became *Little Pakistan* – a separated city almost at war with itself.

Since Bradford lost its glory in the textile sector, its technology and skills became obsolete whilst trying to compete with upcoming industries in Germany, Japan, and South Korea. The Wool Exchange was deserted. Mills were locked. The labourers became redundant, and it seemed as if almost every second worker was laid off. The first generation of East Asians struggled to find work, due to their lack of

skills, language, and culture. Observing the norm of those around them, with time, they habituated into 'dole mongers'. Another trend started. The bigger family 'earned' higher *dole*, so the families grew in size and dependence. I arrived into a diaspora which was devoid of any sort of mission, vision, or destination.

In the 1980s, Bradford had been plagued by almost every evil, such as prostitution, drug addiction, car theft, drug dealing, underage sex and alcoholics alcoholism

Areas like Thornbury had run-down terraced houses. Hardly anyone spoke English there. Listerhills was deemed to be a no-go area for the average Joe because of the druggies and prostitutes. Often, whilst walking and offering a neighbourly smile, you would get a growling 'what are you looking at? I'll kick the s\*\*t out o' ya'.

The city further divided when the local population started deserting the areas where the Pakistanis and Indians had moved into. The trend became obvious. Pakistanis would move to a place and the local population would sell up and move out due to prejudices against Asians. This discriminatory behaviour resulted in the ghettoisation of areas in Bradford and the segregation of communities. Racism, gang fights and prejudice were rife. There were too few resources for too many hands. It was a pipe dream for a local to think of a better future with some ray of hope.

And I had landed here, a hopeless place, from thousands of miles away, to carve out my destiny. Looking for work in Bradford was like finding a needle in a haystack.

I soon became familiar with Bradfordian customs and way of life. A quick assessment made it clear that I was in a challenging place. Spending from my limited pocket after converting Pakistan rupees into Pounds Sterling was a nightmarish move. My savings dwindled and almost became non-existent. After a few days of staying at Gulshan's parents, we decided to rent a flat to protect our self-esteem and privacy. Almost nobody questioned our decision and we moved out, realising that this was the independent living style in the UK.

Our first house in Bradford was a 'back-to-back' flat in a not so posh location of Bradford. It was a small flat which was split from the middle, ending before it started. We joked that it was hardly bigger than a doll's house, but it still gave me some independence

and I started scrambling for jobs.

When my relatives came to know about my quest for work, I was told, 'There are no good jobs for us Pakistanis, only odd jobs here and there. The only options are off license, grocery, or fast-food shops, if you get lucky.'

At home, I looked at my hard-earned Diploma in Electrical Engineering and my bachelor's degree in Science; it didn't look like it was worth the paper it was printed on. I met a few university graduates from Pakistan who were doing these odd jobs at retail stores but speaking to them further dented my passion and hopes.

When I started looking for jobs in the engineering sector, the situation was even worse. The industrial backbone of the city had been fractured. The few surviving factories were located miles outside the city in an almost no-man's-land. Public transport was limited and commuting was a horrendous idea.

It just so happened that I secured my first job at a factory owned by a Jew.

The medium-sized lighting factory was located on the upper side of the Bradford/Leeds Road. It covered every aspect of interior and exterior lighting for trade, domestic and commercial customers throughout Bradford, Leeds and West Yorkshire and was a family business, boasting a silver jubilee in the lighting trade. The lighting shop and factory combination gave it a cutting edge in competition by offering unrivalled customer service with a wide range of styles, models and uses to choose from.

A medium bespectacled man with a greyish beard and philosopher's eyes sat on the supervisory chair. I took him for a senior manager, but David turned out to be one of the owners. I hastily handed him my one-page CV and was about to dash out for the exit. I saw his facial expression and it stopped me in my tracks.

'Muslim?' He looked at me inquiringly.

'Yes, a Pakistani Muslim.' I nodded in affirmation.

'That is an icing on the cake, then.' He winked and said in a pleasant tone, 'I'm your Jewish cousin and a believer.' He extended his hand for a strong handshake.

I shook his hand and looked at him sheepishly. He was the first Jew I ever met. The very word brought alive all the stories of Jewish

conspiracy theories that most of the Pakistani Muslims were brought up with.

‘Do you have some work for me?’ I tried to stay cool, calm, and collected. My savings were almost on the brink of extinction and every single pound counted.

He shook his head in a no. ‘New to the town?’

Perhaps my flushed face struck him. I couldn’t speak but managed to signal a yes.

‘Hmm.’ He stroked his chin for a moment. ‘I don’t have a job, but another option is available if you are interested.’

‘Interested?’ He must be kidding. I was ready to sign my pact in blood with the devil at that moment of bleakness.

‘I am capable of doing anything.’ I uttered a battle-cry, sounding desperate for a job.

‘Well, it won’t be you but your supervisor, a quality controller, as you don’t seem to have training or a diploma in handling electrical gadgets, but you may be able to pull it off in supervision. Anthony’s assistant is gone, and he is looking for one. I will lend you some equipment and put in a good word for you. The rest is your luck. You have to run real fast to keep up with Anthony. Remember, I can only give you a push. You need to make a place here for yourself.’ Smiling, he winked again, and my heart soared, as if a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

‘A push is more than enough, Archimedes said. If you give me a lever and a place to stand, I can move the world,’ I mused in happiness.

‘Wow.’ Look at your ambitions.’ He patted my shoulder. ‘So long, my cousin.’

I had nailed my first job in Bradford. I had found a lever and the place to stand, and I was ready to move the world. This was where my first misconception, which was somehow ingrained against Jews, from being a kid, was shattered.





# These Headwinds Blow to Take You Higher

“

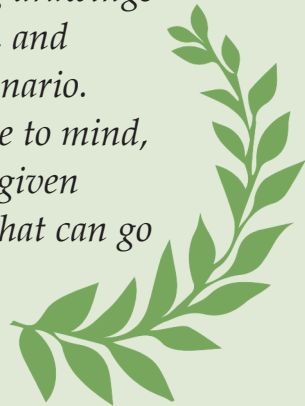
*Once all struggle is grasped,  
miracles are possible.*

”

Mao Zedong

*“I soon figured out that I had stepped into the eye of the storm. I was chosen to carry out a gigantic task which would either make or break me in terms of my future opportunities. I had to keep the machines going, whatever it took. Since they were going down often, I became an eager beaver in the first few weeks of my work. Most machines were built on advanced technology for that time, using programmable logic controllers. It was a giant leap from my apprenticeship level, and I had to bridge the gap. So, I burnt the midnight oil studying the systems, processes, and internal functions of the machines, alongside which I was also receiving good support and coaching from my manager, Mr. Eric Howard.*

*I would stay late, copying drawings and the internal blueprints, and studying the worst-case scenario. Murphy’s Law used to come to mind, reminding me that, ‘If in a given situation there’s anything that can go wrong, it will’.*



**L**ife in Bradford stood still despite the graces of my 'Jewish Cousin', David.

I used to read the Daily Telegraph and Argus to search for jobs and would put a dozen résumés in my bag to hand them out to offices or shops that I would come across en route to the lighting factory. I was mentally ready for any kind of job, irrespective of the workload. My experience, coupled with my skills and education, made me eligible for several jobs. To find new opportunities, I would change my route to work regularly and drop off my résumés.

In the beginning, a mere 'no' or refusal from a job would have a huge psychological impact on me. It was hard for me to bear the failure and rejection. Soon, though, it became a matter of routine. I would step into an office or a shop, analyse the place, and single out someone who would look like a manager or an owner, take out my CV from the bag and hand it over. I was soon able to read faces through the non-verbal language and trudge along without much grief. I would return home and try to catch some sleep, hoping for a better tomorrow. In those dull, damp, and frozen days, I read the success story of Colonel Sanders, the founder and owner of the world-famous fast-food chain, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC). Colonel Harland Sanders actively began franchising his chicken business at the age of 65. Angered after receiving his first social security cheque for a mere \$105, Colonel Sanders began to question himself, asking what other people would find valuable and what he could give to society? Many people have great ideas but are unable to materialise them. Colonel Sanders showed us it was possible to bring ideas to life; you just had to be different in your approach to implement it. The Colonel embarked upon his journey across the United States, but he was refused 1,009 times before he heard his first yes. So, just like the Colonel, I had earned many refusals to my credit; but it didn't deter me from my struggle. I reminded myself constantly that *failure is the first step towards success*.

Gulshan and I were trying to rekindle our love life in the small back-to-back house in a derelict neighbourhood. A coolness to my eyes, coming home was what I would look forward to at the end of the day. The loving embrace of Gulshan and the rush of excitement

from my sons kept me going.

I was getting along fine with Anthony. My earlier skills, learnt for the diploma course, came in handy. My ambitions would still call to me with a warm inviting smile, invoking the message of infinite possibilities beyond the last rejection. I had put up my favourite verse in Urdu on a big chart in my grim and dingy bedroom:

*Tundi-e baad-e-mukhalif se na ghabra ay uqaab*

*Ye tou chalti hai tujhay ooncha urranay keliye.*

The verse meant:

‘Intensity of the headwind, O’ Eagle, don’t fear.

It only blows to help you fly even higher.’

I would usually sink into my sleep looking at the verse and it was the first thing I saw upon waking. Along with the unconditional love of Gulshan, the power and pull of ambitions and dreams and the success stories of people I would read about in the papers, it was perhaps this verse which kept me going on the rocky road and made all the difference.

One day I came across an advertisement which lit up my eyes. It was placed by a Bradford-based company, Barraclough’s Soft Drinks Ltd. (later taken over by Princes – a subsidiary of the Mitsubishi Corporation). Princes was founded in 1880 by Simpson & Roberts. It had grown from a small importer of canned fish into a leading food and drink supplier. Their products ranged from fruit juice, canned meat and vegetables, fish, and fruit, to microwave meals and sandwich spreads. Later, it expanded into the European market, and it was one of the rare companies acquired by the Japanese juggernaut, Mitsubishi.

The job advert was a wake-up call for me to pursue my dreams as an engineer – the one thing I was qualified for. I sent the application hoping that I would be shortlisted for an interview. I received a response in two weeks – I had been shortlisted for the interview.

It was only when I set off for the interview that the grim reality dawned upon me. Princes was in the suburbs of Bradford. The public transport availability for this route was extremely limited. It was

approximately four miles away from where I was living. However, after skidding and skating on the icy roads, I made it to the interview room on a chilly afternoon.

I was greeted by Princes' HR manager, Mr. David Nutter, and engineering manager, Mr. Ray Shippey. I walked tall into the interview room and fielded the questions they threw at me. The knowledge and training acquired in Pakistan during the apprenticeship had come in handy. Most of the questions were technical in nature, relating to electronic and electrical processes, which I answered with utmost confidence. I was trying to read the faces of my interviewers to judge their emotions. After an hour-long grilling, I felt as if I had made it. However, my judgment badly betrayed me.

David stretched out his hand. 'Toaha, it really was nice meeting you. You're good, but for us you're overqualified due to your degree and previous experience. We can't hire you for the position you've applied for.'

My heart sank and I could feel butterflies in my stomach.

'The good news is that we might be able to appoint you to an even better position in the electrical engineering department in the next two weeks. It's an upcoming post but it's more in sync with your background. If you accept, I have a feeling you're going to like it,' Ray Shippey added while still shaking my hand.

Those two weeks seemed a distant proposition with a tinge of ambiguity about my future, so I tried to remarket myself to them for the existing vacancy, but I was asked to wait for what they wanted me to do.

With my future hanging in the balance, my thoughts would occasionally wander off. Then, I received a brown envelope which gave me goose bumps as I opened it. Lo and behold! It was a job offer signed by David Nutter.

So, finally, I started my job in the electrical engineering department.

The factory was spread over several acres in Bradford, producing soft drinks daily. There were almost two hundred trained professionals executing the tasks and ensuring deadlines were met. Massive lorries could be seen queuing up in the pickup and delivery

lanes. The central room contained the master computer which kept the plant up and running. The packaging machine would package at the rate of forty thousand bottles an hour, so missing an hour meant losing hundreds of thousands of pounds in terms of delayed deliveries. So, the cardinal rule was simple: *Keep the machine and supply chain running.*

I soon figured out that I had stepped into the eye of the storm. I was chosen to carry out a gigantic task which would either make me or break me in terms of my future opportunities. I had to keep the machines going, whatever it took. Since they were breaking down often, I became an eager beaver in the first few weeks of my work. Most machines were built on advanced technology for that time, using programmable logic controllers. It was a giant leap from my apprenticeship level, and I had to bridge the gap. So, I burnt the midnight oil studying the systems, processes, and internal functions of the machines, alongside which I was also receiving good support and coaching from my manager, Mr. Eric Howard.

I would stay late, copying drawings and the internal blueprints, and studying the worst-case scenario. Murphy's Law used to come to mind, reminding me that *'If in a given situation there's anything that can go wrong, it will'*.

However, it wasn't only the machines I had to master. I came across the 'northerners – the Yorkshire folks' and to understand the great divide between the 'north' and 'south' of England. The culture of Yorkshire developed over the county's history, receiving influences from those who came to control the region, including the Celts, Romans, Anglos, Vikings, Normans and more. Yorkshire people hold a keen sense of regional identity and have been viewed to identify more strongly with their county than their country. The Yorkshire dialect and accent were distinctive. My observation of the people of Yorkshire was that they were immensely proud, both of their county and their identity as Yorkshire folk. Another aspect of the most common stereotype of a Yorkshire person was being tight with money: there is a British saying that a Yorkshireman is a Scotsman with all the generosity squeezed out of him, which references how Scots are also stereotyped as being tight but not as tight as Yorkshire folk.

I also discovered the interesting Yorkshireman's motto that further fuelled the stereotypical image:

*'Ear all, see all, say nowt. Eyt all, sup all, pay nowt. And if ivver tha does owt fer nowt – allus do it fer thissen'.*

*Translation: 'Hear all, see all, say nothing. Eat all, drink all, pay nothing. And if ever you do anything for nothing – always do it for yourself'.*

Incidentally, the cultural traits description fitted well for the many from Yorkshire working at Princes with few exceptions, the real hardworking folks.

A proverb often heard about Yorkshire people is, *'Where there's muck, there's brass'.*

Apart from the existing stereotypes and with various similarities and differences, Princes bore the typical taste of being in the 'North'. Other than the segregated *Pakistanised* part of Bradford, Princes was a majority white place where lots of eyebrows were raised at the introduction of a brown skinned 'Pakistani' in the engineering department. I stuck out like a sore thumb. In the first few weeks I figured out that I had to swim with sharks and that staying alive would be my personal endeavour.

In the earlier days, while I was getting to know the machines and computers to make some sense of my responsibilities, I heard the following comments being passed around me:

'Hi mate, know any English?'

'Speak English to me, fella.'

'Come on. No beer, no alcohol. Milk and water are for kids.'

'What's halal? Try some pork ribs and you'll realize what you've been missing all your life.'

'You got one wife? I thought you Muslim guys believe in having four?'

'Do you still break your fast if you drink beer?'

'Five prayers a day! I don't even exercise that much in a week. Don't you get tired of it?'

This kind of idiocy and ignorance poured in, becoming part of the daily routine. In the beginning, I took them as ignorant of my culture and, yes, a few of them were. However, there were only a few who espoused this kind of nonsense to work me up or tease me. Because I was new in the organisation, I had to bear it, so I kept on working



without taking notice of such provocation. I kept telling myself, *'Once all struggle is grasped, miracles are possible,'* as Mao Zedong said. Only those succeed who focus on their goals. I told myself to knuckle down and keep going.

I was hardly a month into my time at Princes when the moment of trial struck.

It was a Friday afternoon. The clock was about to strike five and most of the workers looked jubilant, thinking of their pending weekend plans. Suddenly, the alarm beeped and the screen in front of me started flashing a red light, indicating a problem with the palletizer that needed fixing immediately.

'Shite!' My senior manager, Eric Howard (a thorough gentleman, may God bless his soul) thumped his forehead. 'The weekend is screwed, mates.' He signalled to all of us to follow him.

Mike Begg, the production manager, was already entrenched there with his four staff. His face looked tense with eyes that regarded us coldly, as if they were finding fault with us. Mike and his mates were scared about not meeting the daily delivery target, which now seemed to be in jeopardy.

'Eric, save my ass, fella,' he murmured with a pleading look on his face. 'We have to meet the delivery order and the next shift is a few hours away.'

Eric nodded his head confidently. Picking up his AVO-meter, he brushed me aside and swaggered his way to the machine. He usually wouldn't take much notice of me around him as I was very new in the team.

An hour passed and Mike's face became ever more flushed. He was pacing around the room with an odd expression on his face. Eric was still entangled with the other three engineers. But the red light stubbornly remained on. He was becoming restless and edgy, and his curses were erupting repeatedly but creating no luck on his part.

At around 6:30pm, Eric gave up.

'Mikey, mate,' he threw his hands up in the air and quickly dashed out. 'I am hosting a dinner tonight and my wife will slaughter me if I get home late.'

Mike helplessly watched him disappear. He wanted to cry halt, but he muffled it. What could he do? Mike's shift was over, and he

couldn't delay it any further. Eric gave all of us a stare.

Managing Director, John Harrison had also arrived there in the meantime.

'Lads, where's that Pakistani engineer? The new guy?' John shouted.

Hardly noticing my presence, all of them looked at each other with inquisitive faces.

'Here I am,' I said, stepping forward.

'Hmmm.' John gave me a sarcastic look. 'Do you know what to do with this machine or are you leaving for dinner with your wife as well?'

'I'll stay until we fix the machine. I know the choice between dinner and work; I understand it's essential for us to meet our delivery order,' I replied, trying to build some rapport with him.

'No need for speeches, mate.' It was another engineer who waved me ahead. He seemed so sure of my failure that it was oozing out of every part of his body.

I took my AVO-meter and stepped forward. I looked at the panels for some time. Its circuit breakers were tripping.

'I need its map,' I requested.

'Map?' The engineer's face went blank, though it still wore a ridiculous expression.

'Yes, the map, guys! The electrical drawings of this machine. It's the first thing I heard that made sense in the whole day!' The plant manager roared.

The whip accelerated the process, and the map arrived within a few minutes. I prayed inside my heart and thought of my instructor, Mr. Khan, from the technical college during my apprenticeship.

'Remember...' he would raise his index finger authoritatively, '... never open a machine without its map. For machines, map is the territory.'

It took me twenty minutes to decipher the map. Finally, I felt I was almost there.

'I believe we are barking up the wrong tree. The problem is not on the control side, it is on the power side. It keeps triggering the circuit breaker and causing it to trip.' I tried to elaborate, and the plant manager blankly nodded. It seemed that he didn't get most of what

I said but he couldn't care less. His prime concern was to get the machine going.

I got to work instantly. In the next ten minutes, the electromagnetic part causing the trip, was replaced.

The red bulb turned green, and the machine whirred into action. The plant manager's face lit up and the engineers looked almost shell-shocked.

'Well done, mate.' It was John Harrison. 'Can you stay till 10pm just in case?'

'Well, yes... but the last bus leaves at 8pm.' I weighed in on my answer. The prospects of walking back at that time were simply suicidal.

'No problem.' John turned to Mike. 'Get Toaha a cab for home when he finishes at ten.'

Mike hastily nodded his head. He wanted this painful thing to be over.

*Thank God.* I had a feeling of satisfaction inside.

It was my turn to ground my feet and lift up the earth. My professional journey in Bradford had just begun.

# Mr. Fix It vs Mr. Troublemaker

“

*First they ignore you  
Then laugh at you, and hate you  
Then they fight you  
Then you win.*

”

**Robbie Williams**

*“One winter morning, the jealousy brewing against me reached new heights. I left my department for a small task and a big slogan greeted me on my return. Paki b\*\*\*\*\*d, it said in glaring black ink. It almost choked me out and tears welled up in my eyes. It was the first time I sensed a crack in my armour. I took a seat, trying to manage my emotions when Timothy Williams turned up. Tim was one of the generous souls around. He was a large sized bloke with a long smiley face and gentle eyes. He was a kind-hearted man who was very supportive at the right times.”*



The manager, Eric Howard, had little knowledge of computers and modern technology. Although he was a good guy and very down to earth, he was neither prepared nor flexible enough to learn new skills. What he lacked in technical skills, he more than made up for in personal skills, giving me support on several occasions to help me settle in. Some of his staff members had become stuck in their ways, not putting any effort into learning, and equipping themselves with modern technology to keep up with the times.

Unfortunately, Eric was removed from his job, and Ray Shippey became his successor. The new management was not only task-oriented but also result oriented. One day, John Harrison, the General Manager, was standing on the crate-wrapping machine and seemed upset that every day, two hours of production was being lost because of a breakdown of the machine due to a recurring 'door open' fault. He asked me if I could investigate this matter and find a solution. This machine had almost ten door switches and it would not run if any of the doors was open. I looked at the machine and realised the problem. The machine had only one light to indicate that a door was open. To improve the working of the machine at its optimum level, what we needed was to devise a system alerting us to which one of the ten doors was open.

'John, I think I can fix the problem,' I replied.

'That's good news. How long will it take and what will it cost?' asked John.

'I think it may cost a few hundred quid to buy the material to create a system to indicate the 'door open' error, a few days to install the system and fix the fault,' I replied.

I placed LED lights on the control panel for every door that would light up whenever a door would be open.

I was successful in solving the problem that had been annoying the operators and shift supervisors of the machine for a long time.

Production staff at the factory were happy now because the machine was working at/to its full capacity and the production level had increased. It saved the management a lot of production time and money. That was the moment when I started getting recognition for my services, earning the title of 'Mr. Fix It', among many.

John often used to repeat that, 'As long as Toaha is here, everything

will be fixed.’ Because of my ability to fix any kind of machinery faults, he once taunted many workers by saying, ‘Toaha came from a remote village in Pakistan, a village whose name we don’t even know, and he solved this problem. If he can do it, why can’t you?’

For many, these words were like adding salt to a wound, as an ‘outsider’ was being preferred and appreciated over the locals. My success, and progressing along the ranks in the factory, made some of my peers and colleagues jealous of me. However, enlightened people like Ray Shippey, Derrick Butterfield, Tim Williams, along with many others, were supporting me as a colleague.

After a few weeks, Ray Shippey was replaced by another engineer called Jon Godfrey, and Mike Dawson, Chief Engineer, was replaced by Paul White. For a while, Derrick Leak was appointed as Manager, but he could not sustain the pressure put on him by the senior management and was thus replaced by John Yeoman, ironically known as *Donkey* by some sections of the staff.



One winter morning, the jealousy brewing against me reached new heights. I left my department for a small task and a big slogan greeted me on my return. *Paki b\*\*\*\*\*d*, it said in glaring black ink. It almost choked me out and tears welled up in my eyes. It was the first time I sensed a crack in my armour. I took a seat, trying to manage my emotions when Timothy Williams turned up. Tim was one of the generous souls around. He was a large sized bloke with a long smiley face and gentle eyes. He was a kind-hearted man who was very supportive at the right times.

‘Toaha, you alright mate?’ I heard his chuckle. ‘Oh, I see’. His eyes traced the ‘Paki B\*\*\*\*\*d’ graffiti on the wall and he grimaced. ‘These idiots don’t know the world has changed. Don’t worry; *they* will have to change eventually,’ he asserted.

I remained put. Even these words felt like a pat on the back.

‘Don’t worry, Toaha. They’re doing it to scare you off. All you need

to do is to take it on your chin. You are a hardworking man, and you can carve out a place for yourself here. Just don't give up.' He tried to motivate me. 'And if you can't beat them, join the B\*\*\*\*\*ds.'

The last phrase brought a grin to my face. I felt better. It lifted my spirits. I dug deeper into my trenches. Tim's words not only nursed my wounds, but they were also the start of a long-term family relationship with Tim's family, which my family still cherishes.

I was quick enough to report this incident to the senior management, but it was brushed under the carpet. Further remarks such as *black sausage*, *black scum*, etc. were often written about me at various places in the factory.

A certain group of people would go every hour for a tea/smoke break but would object to my five-minute prayer break. There were people who would sabotage my work, which would even sometimes threaten my life, such as turning the electric supply on whilst I was working on the panel cables. Luckily for me, this group of people came under scrutiny by the production team, following an internal report by the Production Manager that they were going to the pub drinking for hours, while on paper they were showing themselves to be at work and claiming overtime by cheating. One Saturday, Brian Stein, the factory manager, disliked for his Irish origin, and Derek Leak, decided to show up unannounced in order to check whether 'the group' was there or not. Eventually, the group was found in the pub, completely inebriated. The entire group was asked to voluntarily resign from their jobs, or they would be sacked. Two of them resigned and the remaining two refused to resign and were subsequently sacked. Then, unfortunately, Derek Leak left under suspicious circumstances and John Yeoman replaced him. This was when the racist behaviour took its toll on me and turned into a very ugly episode.

Yeoman, rather than becoming a part of the solution, sadly became part of the problem. Whenever I raised the issue of racist behaviour in the workplace against me, John used to try to cover it up or play it down. He kind of joined *the boys*. He was so blatantly racist that once, while having lunch together with Adrian Jackson and me, he was talking about a company in front of me and calling its Muslim owner a *fu\*\*\*\*\* Paki Muslim*. Adrian gave him a stern look as this comment



by Yeoman angered him. He could not believe that Yeomen had made such a culturally insensitive comment, especially as I was right there. *The racism had passed the dinner-table test.*

Together with John Yeoman, a totally new management was brought in, including a Chief Engineer, William Redman, and an engineering manager, George McDonald. The rumours were that McDonald was outright racist, as once referring to me, he said, 'I want to get rid of this Paki B\*\*\*\*\*d.' I was warned by my friends to be extremely cautious.

From that moment on, I knew that if my managers were holding such racist views, then my prospects of flourishing in this place were extremely limited.



The tale of my five years with highs and lows at Princes is quite a story. For me, working at Princes was nothing less than a dream. I had already left an initial impression at the factory with most having an early idea about my potential, ability, and dedication towards Princes. The trend of *look busy and do nothing* was the norm amongst some of the workers at the factory and they had formed a clique with others from different departments and some people from management, giving them protection to brew and legitimise their views. It made me feel as if I was being marginalised.

Like Tim, I was always willing to learn new things at the factory for me to grow and for the company to get a competitive edge over others. For me, getting used to new machinery was more important than going home or taking breaks. Just like Tim and Derrick, for me, perfection was the ultimate standard, which was what I was trying to adhere to at work.

But somehow, these traits and desires went against me, and I became a nuisance for some of the engineers at work. Tim and Derrick had also been targeted and teased for these traits but there was no race issue for them.

# Back to Education

June, 1994

“

*Study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing that it takes in.*

”

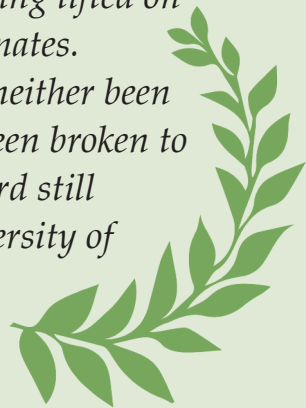
Leonardo da Vinci

*“However, I trusted the British judicial system, and decided to stay on and contest the discrimination. I wanted to create awareness in the masses against racial and religious discrimination so that society could become harmonious. So, I told myself that if I did not stand up to fight against these social evils, people would never learn, and future generations would suffer.*

*And then finally, my dream was realised. It was in September 1996 that I left behind the corridors of the University of Bradford with my head held high; I had become a graduate of the University of Bradford.*

*The four-year Bachelors (Honours) Degree in Electronics and Electrical Engineering with Management was completed in two years by the ‘Chacha’ who was now being lifted on the shoulders of his classmates.*

*The record that I set had neither been made before me nor has been broken to date. Thus, Chacha’s record still stands intact at the University of Bradford.”*



**W**e had moved to a beautiful house in Bradford 7, where our children also had access to a particularly good school in the area. Moreover, we owned this place which was also an achievement for us as a family. Getting up on the property ladder was a luxury. But this series of good news didn't last for long.

There was a cold war brewing against me at Princes. Other like-minded people such as Tim and Derek were also targets.

I felt as if I was being stalked by unseen eyes. It seemed as if all my actions, including leaving my office for breaks, for prayers, bringing halal meals for lunch, making telephone calls and even meetings with my project team, were being monitored. These suspicions of stalking were proven right after a barrage of incidents took place, such as drawing a cross on my bag and breaking into my designated locker in the changing room.

My friends at the factory used to notice all these postings with a heavy heart but despite my insistence, they were too scared to point out the culprits. Some of them really did not have an idea about what was going on and others were tight-lipped with fear of becoming victims of this guerrilla war if they spoke out against the perpetrators. I tried to ignore this situation for two to three weeks but soon my patience ran out.

Although legislation had changed a lot in the UK, many people were stuck in the sixties' mindset. In fact, it later became known that institutional racism had become prevalent in areas, for example, of housing and policing, and rumours of racial targeting circling in the community proved to be correct.

I analysed the developments at work and concluded that the easiest way out was to quit. For me, resigning from Princes and switching to another prestigious organisation seemed the better way. But this may have taken me to a similar company where some of my colleagues would judge me on my faith and identity rather than my professional skills. This would have led to a never-ending spiral of quitting and switching.

However, I trusted the British judicial system, and decided to stay on and contest the discrimination. I wanted to create awareness in the masses against racial and religious discrimination so that society could become harmonious. So, I told myself that if I did not stand up

to fight against these social evils, people would never learn, and future generations would suffer.

I was not alone in this suffering as when I returned home every night stressed and distressed, my wife would share my burden and mentally went through the same agony. She was the only person to understand that I was breaking under work stress and work discrimination and had started feeling ill. She advised me to consult a physician before things got worse and advised me to take some time off from work and rest until I felt better.

Even though I was in unbelievably bad shape and had been advised by the doctor to rest, the management refused to grant my request for rest and sick leave, and I started receiving warnings for availing too many sick leaves. I tried to explain the situation on several occasions, but my words were ignored. Finally, after losing my patience and having the feeling of being cornered at work, I went to the senior management to apprise them of my grievances, but they gave me the cold shoulder. I could guess from their body language that they were enjoying the whole saga. Noticing that the senior management, who should have had more understanding, were unwilling to separate banter and jokes from blatant racism and continuous discrimination, left me with no other choice but to lodge a formal complaint at the Racial Equality Commission. I trusted in the British legal system and fought the matter and decided to highlight the issues.

Appearing before the Commission and becoming a part of their proceedings was another tough phase and my confusion and stress became further aggravated. Although the updates and bulletins on notice boards against me vanished, I could see the visible, harsh, and offensive behaviour of a few colleagues, forcing my exclusion from work related matters, such as being left out of briefings, updates, etc. Tim, who was also facing problems of being victimised, could not take it anymore, and left his job within a short span of time. I urged Tim to stay and highlight the issues alongside me to make the company realise the gravity of the situation, but due to his family circumstances he also resigned, wishing me the best of luck.

Then one afternoon, I was asked to visit the Managing Director's office. As soon as I reached the office, I saw John Harrison holding

his head in both his hands. A representative of the local Racial Equality Commission was in the room, too.

'Toaha, you were right! It was Brian and I who pushed you into this quagmire without realizing the realities on ground,' said John, with utter anguish.

I found out that the Commission's report highlighted several wrongdoings; thus, my grievances were proven to be correct. Although, because of the Commission's proceedings, the fire against me had died down a bit, some members of staff had confidentially warned me that the burner was still running. The Commission had found out that I suffered religious and racial discrimination from a few of my colleagues, with the management also being partially complicit in this whole episode. Most surprisingly, it was only three or four people who did not like me, yet this handful of people had been instigating others to act against me, due to professional jealousy.

'The problem is that I need your help. We need to implement principles of tolerance and equality at Princes and change this decades old culture,' John remarked in an imperious tone with the commission's representative also nodding in the affirmative.

'Then what should I do?' I asked. 'Should I bear all this or leave quietly?'

'No, obviously not! In your case there is enough evidence for the Employment Tribunal,' replied a nervous looking John, who was rubbing his forehead and probably thinking about the consequences if I decided to take the matter to the Tribunal.

I was perplexed. *Then what should I do?*

'Toaha, do me a favour, and take some time off in the form of paid leave,' John advised.

Shocked, I looked towards John, but the Commission's representative then spoke for the first time.

'It's John's advice, Toaha, not mine. I have already mentioned the unjust practices against you in my report and for me, the case is clear. If Princes is unable to implement its principles and standards of equality, then they must face serious repercussions. But it is John's advice to you as a friend, so that he can take corrective measures.'

I took a deep breath and tried to think over the whole affair for a little while. On the one hand were my agonising discriminatory

experiences, on the other, a good friend was asking me for a favour. I was never a quitter. I had taken the hardest challenges of my life head on.

‘John, you know that I will never quit and have never done so in the past. I know my strengths and weaknesses. I have given the best years of my life to Princes. I treated Princes as my family, and I won’t quit my family only because some people have problems with my race, colour and religion,’ I replied to John, who knew that it would be hard to convince me to take a sabbatical. John was looking at me anxiously while tapping both his hands on the table, which clearly indicated that he had been fooled by some of the members of his team.

But then something struck me, and I shared it with John.

‘Look, John, I respect our working relationship and would never like you to land in hot water because of this very untoward situation. You have always taken a stand for me and tried to help me in difficult situations and that is what I respect and value. I have a suggestion which would not only solve your problems but would also set me on a better path.’ John listened as I told him what was on my mind. ‘I will take some time off to complete an engineering degree at the University of Bradford and in the meantime you can fix the problems that are plaguing the factory.’

John’s customary glow returned to his face. My proposal seemed to have made him happy. He couldn’t hide his excitement.

‘That’s a deal, buddy,’ said an extremely relieved John. He grabbed my hand and hugged me. ‘Princes will pay for your tuition fees and related expenses, like books or projects,’ he assured me.

This was somehow an anchor to my professional dreams but was also the beginning of a new journey in my life.



## September 1994, University of Bradford

The University of Bradford was the 40<sup>th</sup> University to be established in the UK. It was chartered by the Queen in 1966, although the predecessors to the university were active in teaching endeavours since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Comprising 15,000 students, the University was divided between a central campus and a business school. Almost one fifth of the students at the university were foreigners from China, Indonesia, Thailand, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Pakistan, etc. The Centre for Peace Studies was established in Bradford in 1974 and it is the largest academic centre of its type in the world today.

I had to study in the Richmond Road Campus of the University, just twenty minutes from my house, a walking distance. The moment I entered the Campus, I was awestruck by the magnificence of the huge structures of the Campus buildings. I then saw the central reception of the University which looked nothing less than a global festival, having students of all colours, races, and ethnicities.

My classroom was also a spectacle of multiculturalism and most of the students were in their twenties. That is why, on the very first day, I was honoured with the nickname, *Chacha*, being the most senior student in the class.

'Chacha!' shouted someone from the back. I looked behind me and saw a couple of Asian students who tried to play dumb, as if they were not the ones who shouted. Then again, I heard another shout of 'Chacha!' from my left, and then realised that this would be my new name here at the University. The Urdu word means Uncle in English.

With this realisation, I also thought about the mountain that I was supposed to climb by trying to complete a four-year engineering degree in just two years because Princes only agreed to a two-year paid leave.





My two years at the University were, nonetheless, a unique experience. As the University was in a city with a large Pakistani population, it also had a number of Pakistani students who would act like thugs. You could see groups of Pakistani youths hanging out together, bullying the freshmen. They had crew cut hair and wore studs. They looked as if they were always ready to scuffle with others, something which I witnessed on my very second day.

'Hey mate, where are you heading towards?' a guy in the group of Pakistani students asked a new white freshman. Even before the freshman responded, another guy took off his designer pea cap; in a split second, a third took off his sunglasses and asked 'How do they look on me? Thanks for the gift, mate.'

Being a mature student, I felt that this behaviour was totally disgusting, particularly as I knew that they would not have been brought up this way. I went to those very bullies and said, 'Do you really think that was nice? Imagine if one of you were alone and a group of racists came over and bullied you? You should put yourself in his shoes. You need to go and give his things back.'

All four in the group laughed loudly, before letting their 'prey' off the hook.

But it was the brains rather than the brawn that ruled the University campus. The University libraries, halls, auditoriums, and laboratories were full of those who came here to learn. But unfortunately, Pakistanis were rare in these corridors of education. For me, these corridors were now my life; thus, I was always present there.

I had only one way forward, which was to fulfil my dream and achieve my goal in two years. Sarcastic remarks from some of the workers at the factory were still fresh in my ears. *You are going to a British university, and not a Pakistani one. We will soon see what you are made of. When you complete your degree, make sure you send me your photo in your graduation gown so that I know that your degree is real, not fake.*

These were the words of colleagues who thought that I could never succeed, considering my Pakistani background and age.

As I had entered the higher education journey far later than my peers, I had to spend more time studying. I was always to be found either in the lecture halls or in the library. Everyone had the impression about me that I was in love with someone and was thus not socializing much. But they soon realised that I was serious about my studies and getting my degree. Even the teachers, who regularly saw me attending their lectures, gave their help and support. That is why, in this arduous journey, I was literally unable to attend the extracurricular activities in the University. Even though the doors were open, I could not enter them because of shortage of time.

I had to burn the midnight oil in those two years, but this could not have been possible had I not merged my dream with the realities on the ground. Gulshan was also covering my back at home, and the kids were also not making a major issue out of my absence. It seemed as if my engineering degree was not only my dream, but the dream of my whole family. It was a real mission, getting the research project designed and built. I submitted it well within the deadline.

During my studies, my young classmates, surprised by my good grades in courses such as Mathematics, started taking free lessons from me. This also helped me in making several good friends at the campus.

And then, finally, my dream was realised. It was in September 1996 that I left behind the corridors of the University of Bradford with my head held high; I had become a graduate of the University of Bradford.

The four-year Bachelors (Honours) Degree in Electronics and Electrical Engineering with Management was completed in two years by the 'Chacha' who was now being hoisted on the shoulders of his classmates.

The record that I set had neither been set before me nor has it been broken to date. Thus, Chacha's record still stands intact at the University of Bradford.



# Paradise Lost

September 1996 to September 1999

“

*All war is a symptom of man's  
failure as a thinking animal*

”

John Steinbeck

*“I had left Pakistan in 1987, when General Zia’s regime was taking its final breaths. When ‘exploding mangoes’ in the General’s plane brought democracy to Pakistan, people had wishful thinking that things would improve. But the next decade was a game of snakes and ladders between major political parties as one overthrew the other. One political analyst went as far as calling the decade after 1988 the lost decade of Pakistan. When I returned, I realised that this analysis was correct in the given circumstances, to say the least”.*



When I returned to Princes with my engineering degree, a different environment with several changes welcomed me. I did not see some of the old faces in management as new people had joined. The most surprising and pleasing scene was witnessing several South Asians at the factory. It seemed as if John Harrison was successful in curbing the racist tensions that were prevalent before I left. A couple of days passed, and I realised that things had really changed.

John Harrison started his factory 'filtration' campaign soon after I left. All those people who had racial prejudice were on the radar of John Harrison. Some consultants were also hired to change the overall workplace environment. John arranged a cordial welcome for me and during our first meeting after my return; he was continuously mentioning that he would always remember my favour.

But soon all hell broke loose when I was told that, even with an engineering degree, I was not needed at Princes any more as the firm had backtracked from their initial agreement of offering me a suitable job commensurate with my degree.

The HR manager, who was not only supporting me but also warning the senior management about the repercussions Princes could face had it not offered me a suitable job, was also replaced by another person who used bullying and discriminatory tactics against me.

For that reason, in the meantime, I had to work in the same department I had left before pursuing my degree. But even in the old department, I was a *persona non grata*. However, I kept working while pursuing my case with senior management for providing a suitable job in accordance with my new qualifications. On the other hand, John Godfrey, a fresh graduate without any work experience, was given a senior level role.

Eventually, I was offered the job of Projects Manager, using my previous agreement as a preamble. I was presented with a chart of tasks by Andy Johnson, and I was ready to proceed.

To complete my tasks effectively for this job, the requisite and most crucial element was having a personal computer as my role required me to use computer aided design (CAD) software to create drawings for new installations. Also, with this new job, I had two

new managers: William Redman and Andy Johnson. They were both, apparently, fine, and normal human beings but both were creating an uneasy working environment for me by not giving me the personal computer that I was promised at the time of my posting. Although they were cautioned by the engineering management about the unreliability of the machine, they still went ahead and purchased an Italian prototype machine which was not tested for commercial use, and it was a struggle to get adequate output from it. At that time, German built machines were being commonly used at Princes and were reliable but switching to an Italian prototype was creating issues in the supply chain. The production was already months behind schedule. Therefore, both managers were under tremendous pressure from senior management to meet the delivery targets. So, I was urged to gear up the pace of production. With no effective support from senior management, it seemed as if I was set to fail. Although I managed to increase its efficiency to some extent, the machine never delivered to its full potential and both the managers came under scathing criticism for purchasing this machine. I was being made a scapegoat in this entire process as both tried to divert all the pressure onto me.

The setback for me was that Tim had already left Princes. His presence used to be a breath of fresh air which helped me in focusing more on my work rather than events taking place around me. Many others at Princes, such as Derrick Butterfield, came forward to support me during my stay there, but Tim clearly stood out to all as the prime witness in my case regarding racial and religious discrimination.

One fine morning, when I was busy tending the machine, Andy Johnson, who seemed incredibly stressed, asked me to meet him at his office in the afternoon for an appraisal. As I entered his office, I sensed an air of unease and he groaned, perhaps because he had expected me not to turn up.

‘Toaha, I called you to have a meeting with me about your progress. I feel that you are not delivering as we expect you to,’ said a confused-looking Andy.

I was not surprised to hear these remarks and asked calmly, ‘Andy, what is it that I haven’t delivered in these six months

according to the task list you provided me with?’

‘I can’t tell you from the top of my head,’ he replied but his emotions did not support his words.

For me, the answer to these remarks was straight and simple.

‘Andy, you called me for an appraisal, thereby meaning that you already had a rough idea of where I was failing. But if you don’t know where I am unable to deliver then I can only assume that you don’t want me here. Because I feel that I have delivered even more than I could deliver, keeping in mind that I did it all without having a personal computer. We also need to take into consideration that we are currently using a prototype machine, not tested in the market, but even then, I improved the efficiency of this machine.’

Further, I forewarned Andy that this machine would never deliver the output it was purchased for. Deep down, Andy also knew this as well, along with the fact that he had not provided me with a PC which I had requested long ago.

After meetings with the Chief Engineer, William Redman, my probationary period was extended, and I was provided with a PC. Due to the prototype’s failure, coupled with several other reasons, Redman was also sacked.

Even my extension did not ensure smooth sailing for me at Princes. Again, my health started deteriorating due to stress at work that my body couldn’t cope with, and the situation was badly affecting my family life. Princes appointed a doctor to assess my stress and he ultimately advised me to take medication and stay away from work. While I was sticking to the doctor’s advice, one of the HR managers visited me to ascertain whether I was really stressed, or if I was making it up. In my mind, I wanted to maintain a balance between home and work life. But my wife, after analysing the whole situation and following several discussions and deliberations, forced me to choose between work and family. Due to the changes in my job and working conditions, I decided to leave, and I submitted my resignation. Since the problems started again and John Harrison had left for the head office in Liverpool, I instructed my lawyer to take legal action, and he was successful in resolving the matter out of court.

Soon after my resignation, I decided to sell my house and move



back to Pakistan. This was a decision I couldn't take alone. It was a collective decision, in the best interest of our children.

I returned after a lengthy gap of ten years and realised that things had become worse in Pakistan.



I had left Pakistan in 1987, when General Zia's regime was taking its final breaths. When a bomb exploded in the General's plane. He died which brought democracy to Pakistan, people had thought that things would improve. But the next decade was a game of snakes and ladders between major political parties as one military overthrew of the government followed the other. One political analyst went as far as calling the decade after 1988 the *lost decade* of Pakistan. When I returned, I realised that this analysis was correct in the given circumstances.

# And then Nothing Seemed to Work...

“

*To live without hope is to cease to  
live*

”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

*“The Gole Bagh Square and the market in Gulgasht Colony in Multan, Pakistan, had not changed a bit in ten years.*

*It looked the same now as I left it a decade ago. The market had scores of bookshops and budget restaurants for local students, where they used to eat either Biryani or chickpeas daily. Due to the heavy influx of students in the area, there were also several fruit juice shops to cater for their young customers. The market also had the same old ice cream parlours, Multani mango shops, masseurs, traffic jams, flies hovering over fruit, crowds enjoying themselves during the haphazard hubbub of the market, chai (tea) stalls around the street corner, with ‘self-proclaimed’ political analysts sipping their teas while discussing national and international affairs. Nothing had changed in ten years in this neighbourhood.”*



Our return to Pakistan was big news for the family. Gulshan and the kids were extremely excited in the beginning. They seemed to blend in pretty well. They also began to like the bright sunny weather – a sharp contrast to the dark, gloomy, and rainy weather of the UK. Mingling with some kids in the family, playing with them and staying awake until late was a new experience for them. They made a lot of friends within a short span of time. The common female gossip here was also something different for Gulshan as compared with the UK.

But I was going through a prolonged period of agony. It was the stress and woe that had accumulated from worrying about my family's future. I would spend most of my day working on my personal diary, recollecting my thoughts. My dreams had faded like mist. Opportunities came and went so quietly, as if my fate had hit a dead end. I had not only lost all my hope but also my sleep and appetite. Even my meetings with good old friends couldn't help or soothe the pain within me.

My mother seemed incredibly happy having Gulshan, me, and kids back home again. She would spend most of her day talking to her grandchildren. It infused a kind of new energy in her. She didn't ask any questions as to why we had returned but, as only a mother could, but she could tell something was wrong.

My father, on the other hand, seemed a little suspicious and worried on our return. He also never asked any questions but, looking at our substantial luggage, he had deciphered the situation we were in. His life went on according to his usual routine. He would wake up for Morning Prayers and go for a walk in the nearby park afterwards. Soon after his walk, he would have a breakfast coupled with reading the newspaper and his huge stock of books. My father hadn't changed at all. Whatever seemed to be going on around him, he never managed to take his eyes off the book he was reading.

Even after ten years, there was still a communication gap between us. Although he used to call us regularly in the UK, his conversations were usually stiff with formality and courtesy. I had the distinct impression that he was more excited to talk to Gulshan and the children than to me, which still made me happy. And the

story was the same even after my return. He was still the same man with his fatherly authority, maintaining his steadfast demeanour over his offspring.



One day when I was about to enter my house, I saw my father leaving with his usual old straight face, head held high, and soul-searching eyes. He suddenly stopped and looked at me.

‘Son?’ he queried in his specific tone, putting his hand on my shoulder.

There was an awkward silence for some time.

‘Son, did you quit? Did you call it quits in the UK?’ he asked plainly in a slightly sad tone.

‘No! Definitely not! Would you expect that from me?’ I responded in a nervous and inquisitive manner.

‘You walk around the house like a defeated man’. He moved forward a little and whispered these heavy words while staring directly into my eyes. ‘It reminds me of your first day at school, your first experience of the outside world, when I saw the same confusion and stress in your eyes, but unlike today, your eyes had a spark of dreams...’ he paused, taking a deep breath.

‘This same spark of dreams in the eyes helped me to escape from a Japanese military prison where I was a Prisoner of War (POW), and the only one among my twenty-one friends to escape and survive. How?’ asked my father while pointing towards his eyes.

‘My eyes have seen a number of dreams, but the biggest dream was for you.’ His tone became pleasant and soothing. ‘I have always believed that you would become a successful person. You are the one who has to, and who will, make me proud.’

With my father’s grip still firmly on my shoulders, I looked down, out of respect. This was the first time he had been so candid with me. Something I had never imagined or expected. I treasure that moment even now.

‘Son, as Dostoyevsky said, *to live without hope is to cease to live*. Believe me, what you have gone through is nothing close to what I experienced in my four years of being a Japanese POW.’

He continued, while reassuring me. Then he suddenly paused and thought over something and then again carried on with his words of wisdom.

‘No matter what happens in life, you have to move forward. Life is like a boxing ring. The last man standing always wins. Go along with your struggle, seek help from the Creator, and you will definitely get his support.’ This was the first time my father asked me to pray in the mosque. Then, suddenly, he went out.



The next few days passed in a silent manner. No one at home knew about my conversation with my father. It was like someone had sparked my long-lost passion inside me. I used to walk daily for a few miles to a nearby canal and throw myself on to the dead grass under the shade of the trees. This was like my personal space for moments of contemplation, introspection, and relaxation.

One evening, I returned home and went to bed early. The family had gone to attend a relative’s wedding ceremony that day. That was the first time I met a great spiritual leader, Khawaja Khan Muhammad, of Naqshbandi lineage – a religious and spiritual scholar who was followed by thousands of people – in my dream.

I could see images of burning heat in my dream. Tall, pointed mountain peaks, on which I was trying to climb with my bare hands. One step forward and two steps backwards. My body was aching with pain; it was burning. I was unconsciously trying to move forward with my tired body, pushing and dragging myself to the limit. And then I saw him again.

He stood there; a gem of a man, tall with an angel-like glowing face, a greyish beard, along with a strange, cooling shine in his eyes. He looked just the same as when I met him for the first time in 1981.

But this time, he was also accompanied by one of his disciples, the late Lala Ji Abid, and his eyes were so very expressive.

When I saw both together, it was as if I was losing my breath. I was sitting on my toes and could feel the pressure of his heavy hands on my shoulders, but this had a soothing effect on my nerves.

'Why are you getting tired and losing hope?' asked Lala Ji (late) in his powerful yet merciful tone. 'And never give up hope on Allah's soothing Mercy (12:87)' he reminded me. 'But if you are tired, then why don't you come to us?'

The pressure of his hands further increased on my shoulders, and it was that which suddenly woke me up from this dream. I felt my clothes soaked in sweat and my head hot with fever. It was a long night. My fever was out of control; flashbacks haunted me again and again in my dreams, and the scenes were constantly re-appearing.

Then, close to dawn, I saw him for the last time, and he repeated his remark 'Why don't you come to us if you are tired?'

I extended my right hand for his support, and I felt as if someone dragged the earth from my feet. I woke up again, but by this time my fever had vanished/gone. It seemed as if there was a purpose behind the vision... what was it?

As I regained consciousness the following morning, there was a strange positivity within me. I had the feeling that something might change. In the midst of this feeling, I met the venerable Khawaja Khan Muhammad. This meeting with him proved to be a blessing in disguise. As soon as he got to know about my past experiences in the UK, he offered me the opportunity to revitalize and run an Islamic Centre which he was heading in Stockwell, London. I couldn't believe the proposal; an Engineering graduate like me faced a complete turnaround not only in his life but also in his profession. After receiving administrative and religious training, I set off again for the UK in October 1999 with my family. Things had of course changed for sure, but was it a change for the better?

I took the first step to find out.

# Bombers in The House

“

*A perfect Muslim is one from whose tongue and hands mankind is safe.*

”

**Muhammad,**  
the prophet of Islam (PBUH)



*“It was my first encounter with Osman B. Hussein, a suicide bomber who made an abortive attempt on 21 July 2005 to kill and injure dozens of Londoners because the bomb-making ‘mastermind’ could not figure out basic mathematics. The Trustees of our Mosque had reported him and his accomplices to the authorities in July 2003 (two years before he committed this heinous crime). The initial investigation revealed that Osman failed to heat the hydrogen peroxide to the right temperature and was, therefore, unable to get the correct concentration required to detonate the bomb. After his arrest, he claimed that his bombs were a hoax in /protest against the Iraq war and that the bombs were never meant to go off. He was sentenced to forty years imprisonment.”*



In 1999, our destination was Stockwell, a South West London district, located in the London Borough of Lambeth. There were a few buildings in the neighbourhood which were over a hundred years old but the centre of interest for the history of Stockwell Manor and hamlet still lies in the Stockwell Green area. Brixton Academy and the historic Brixton town centre were a stone's throw from there. South West London rose to prominence since the political careers of two British premiers, John Major and Margaret Thatcher, who were from this area.

Stockwell Green Muslim Centre was in a building whose claim to fame was that it was the site of William and Catherine Booth's marriage, being the founders of the Salvation Army, a Christian denomination and international movement known for its charity shops and other charitable work, operating in over 120 countries of the world. The building also once served as the United Reform Church. It was due to lack of use for a number of years that the building had become derelict. It was subsequently purchased by British Muslims who converted it into an Islamic Centre after approval by the authorities.

Moving to London from Bradford was another strange twist in karma. Contrary to the slow-paced marathon life in Bradford, life in London was a sprint over hurdles. Life was a rush at the airports, London underground, trains, trams, buses, streets, junctions, footpaths, etc. I remember someone saying that life in London was a 'bittersweet experience'. It is pretty tiring being in London. There is just so much to do, so many people to see, so much to accomplish and so much to miss. For the faint-hearted, there was Dr. Samuel Johnson's quote to draw inspiration from: *The man who is tired of London is tired of life*. Dr. Johnson made lasting contributions to English literature as a poet, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer but somehow managed to remain cheerful, despite living in London in the 18th century where the streets were replete with horse dung, the poor were drinking themselves to death on gin; syphilis was a terminal disease, and if one was a victim of robbery by highwaymen, there was no organised system of police and the chances of robbers being caught were almost non-existent. Thankfully, man has come a long way since then!

The Centre, situated in a building of approximately 3000 square

meters, had some parking spaces inside the gate, which was a huge facilitation in London. A big wooden door opened into the main hall which accommodated approximately 400 people. There was a separate place specified for washroom facilities. At the back of the main hall, there were four ghastly bedrooms which were to be inhabited by my family.

Following six months of intensive training, my life as the Centre Director took off in London. Moving from an engineer at Princes to becoming the leader of an Islamic Centre was a paradigm shift and turn around. Perhaps that is what they call 'turning over a new leaf'.

This was my first phase at the centre. Toaha Qureshi, a British university graduate, and engineer, along with his wife and kids born and raised in the UK, was now looking after a faith-based community centre. From strategic management to looking after the Centre and attendees/students, my family and I were undertaking multiple tasks at the centre. Contrary to my expectations, Gulshan and the children were taking a keen interest, not only in extending the services, but also in its administrative matters for community development. Although I took all the major decisions on my own, I had the feeling that my family's support and my parent's blessings were always with me. This feeling was the chief catalyst for my endeavours.

It seemed as if the centre livened up after our arrival, as we discovered that, prior to our arrival, it was not being used adequately and most of the time it was deserted. Also, the Centre was known as a 'Pakistani' Centre, so we announced its reopening for the community at large. It was as if this news spread like wildfire; because in only the fourth week since our arrival, we had a Friday prayer gathering of about 300 people. Apart from the Friday prayers, attendees also started coming for the five daily prayers and began to send their children for education.

I was performing my duties as instructed by my spiritual leader, Khawaja Khan Muhammad. As my lectures and sermons were in English for the first time, there was an increasing influx of Muslims from other nationalities. Even the local media and people from other faiths started coming to the centre for observation and interviews. Unlike Bradford, Lambeth was much more international in orientation. The different nationalities, different languages, and many cultures, pre-

sented a unique amalgamation in the region. The area had residents from more than 112 nationalities, speaking more than 150 languages, with most maintaining their cultural identity yet integrated in the wide ocean of London.

It was the same story when it came to the attendees at the Centre. Nationalities included Pakistanis, Indians, Bengalis, Sri Lankans, Moroccans, Somalis, Sudanese, Algerians, Egyptians, Saudis, Eritreans, Chinese, Germans, French, Nigerians, West Indians, and Portuguese, among many others.

With this new path of life, I felt as if Allah Almighty had helped me somehow to improve my intercommunication skills. Where it was difficult to make a layman understand even the simplest of things in Multan, I was now lecturing and answering questions in basic Arabic, English, Punjabi, and Urdu.

In this new phase of my life, I had turned into an extremely conservative *Mullah*, to meet the demands of my new role. My new attire included a long beard and Taliban-style dress. I also imposed certain restrictions on the members of my family while trying to change their lifestyles. This change ruled out watching TV, listening to music, going out for recreational activities, etc. Initially, I got a positive response from my family, but with the passage of time, this was becoming a bit too much for them as they had to deal with peer pressure from their friends and the demands of their new??? environment, etc.

The arduous nature of this phase concerned the schooling and nurturing of my children. As a normal parent, I got them admitted to state-run schools so that they could get used to their new environment. This unfamiliar environment was a 180-degree change for them as they had moved from the mono-ethnic, closed-knit community of Bradford, (little Pakistan), to a very diverse community – Brixton, South London, referred to as Little Africa. From their dress to their English accent, everything about them was different. Moreover, my children were supposed to attend their school within four days of moving to London, something they may not have expected to happen so early.

Their first school was the Ernest Bevin in Tooting, where the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, studied for his GCSEs. Day in and day out, my sons were either bullied or got into fights because they were being picked on for the way they talked, looked, or dressed. For them, the

primary source of learning about London was only through school, as our Stockwell Centre rarely had youth counsellors or young attendees. For that purpose, whatever they could learn about London, was through their first school as they tried to adapt

They primarily inherited South London's Hip Hop identity: short back and sides haircut, and low baggy pants which, according to them, made them more socially acceptable. But even this change wasn't enough as they were occasionally ending up in fights on one pretext or the other. One day, my two eldest sons came home bruised, and with torn pockets. The bullies in their school had demanded money and, when they refused to give it, they were ordered to jump up and down. As they jumped, the bullies remarked '*We can hear change.*' They found out that they had money because of the clanging of coins in their pockets, which resulted in a scuffle, with my sons refusing to surrender their money. But even on that occasion, being still in my Bradford mind-set, I considered my sons as the culprits for initiating this fight. I asked them 'How can somebody just come up to you and start a fight for no reason?' Just like my children I, too, soon realised that this was the culture of youngsters in London.

After a year or so, and with an increase in such incidents, as a concerned father, I decided to get my children transferred to Darul Uloom, a religious boarding school in Kent, with the hope that religious education and the disciplined environment could at least keep them safe and prevent them from going down a wrong path.

However, as the boarding school was in the middle of a forest and was nothing less than a confinement, the idea of sending my kids did not work out as we had expected. They resided at the boarding school for almost a year and it provided them with the religious foundation they required.

Up to this point, I have not really introduced my children to you. My eldest son, Talha had inherent leadership qualities which made him a 'person to follow' wherever he went. As he began to attract followers at the school, the senior students made it a point of prestige and couldn't resist teaching him and his younger brother, Saad, a lesson. But due to Talha's strong network, someone blew the whistle on a possible midnight attack on them both. Although Talha managed to fend off the attack, the incident sent me reeling and I decided to bring them

back to London and had them admitted into Balham Preparatory School, an excellent and more moderate 'faith school'.

This was when my kids' school life finally started getting back to normal, even though their social difficulties were still evident. As an administrator of a religio-community centre, I wanted to impose a specific identity upon my kids which they were unwilling to conform to. They had to present themselves as tough, hip-hop individuals to be socially acceptable both at school and in the community. For them 'doing as the Romans do' in London was the way to go, and this led to family friction. Adding to this dilemma were my domestic restrictions that included returning home before sunset, no mobile phones or watching of television, etc.

In 2003, South London, especially Stockwell and Brixton, had become overrun by thugs, gangs, drugs, robberies, prostitution, and other problems plagued the area. I wanted to protect my children and other children of my community from this kind of world, just like any other parent would do. Living in the Centre, in an extremely strict Islamic environment, demanded that I bring up my children in an exemplary form as the community was looking up to my family.

However, after a little while, things started changing. I soon realised that imposing severe restrictions was doing little good and I had to relax the house rules a bit. But now, with that phase of my life passed, my children started to realise that the restrictions I imposed were meant for their welfare. My eldest son, Talha, successfully completed his law degree and then his master's degree in law. He is corporate lawyer and is father of two beautiful daughters and a son. He is sending his daughters to the same moderate Faith School that he used to decry – although the structures and procedures at the school have improved a lot since he was there. My second son, Saad, after getting his master's degree in law, is doing a PhD at Kings College, and is a handsome boy. He is a Dean and Executive General Manager for Navitas, one of the largest educational set up in Europe and Australia with two hundred institutions. Saad has two beautiful children; one son and a daughter. He admits that had it not been for those restrictions, he might have been a totally different man. My third son, Umar, obtained two Masters degrees; the first in marketing and innovation and the second in international commercial law. He followed in my footsteps by giving

back to the community having become a governor for 5 maintained nursery schools, the vice-chair of a Metropolitan Police advisory group, a member of a council advisory group and more. He now has a beautiful daughter and a son. My first daughter, Sarah, has also completed her master's degree and postgraduation in education. She teaches at a university and has three beautiful children. My youngest daughter, Amber, is studying an undergraduate degree programme at a university. So far Gulshan and I have ten beautiful grandchildren and are happy in our life-what else can I ask for, God Almighty has been exceedingly kind to my family. Gulshan and I have more reasons to be grateful to our Creator.

I suppose my children, especially my sons, understand the rationale behind my discipline as a father. As they are now all parents, they too are facing the dilemmas of understanding the perplexities and rationale for discipline. While I accept that, perhaps, much of what I did was not the best course of action at times, my firm belief was that I had to nurture them in the right manner. It is an enigma that one goes through in life. While my parents lived with me in London, their advice was always to raise my children disciplined and well-mannered. At that time, I tried to make use of the 'carrot and stick' policy. Now that I am a grandfather, I also keep advising my children to nurture their offspring in the manner that my parents expected of me.

My children have all been integral elements of a thriving family business which I established, and this is a testimony as to how far they have come in life.



This whole change was primarily influenced on account of my meetings at the Centre with a fairly substantial number of conservative Islamic leaders, some of whom were also involved in establishing the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan. During this time, I was occasionally shouted at and called Osama bin Laden (due to my attire) while walking in the street. The Africans, on the other hand used to ask, 'Where have you come from?' For them, seeing an Asian with a long

beard, was intriguing.

I became so engrossed with this new turn in life because so much was happening. Since our emphasis in the Centre was not only on Islam and religious education, we had started to engage with the local young community, local statutory bodies and communities to divert the youth from falling into the wrong hands. We introduced a free diversionary educational project called HELP (Holidays Education Learning Programme) for the youth that motivated them to improve their grades in SATs, GCSE, and O/A Level examinations.

During the holy month of Ramadhan, Gulshan used to cook a variety of delicious dishes for the attendees, including the homeless. Dozens of young children were enrolled in the Centre to learn the basics of Islam and recitation of the Holy Quran.

The standout story at the centre was that of a French female student from Lille University, who had shown an interest in Islam and travelled all the way to Stockwell to find out more. What astonished us most was the fact that her village in France had neither signs of Islam nor any mosque in the vicinity. Whatever she had heard about Islam was the same clichéd version promoted in the media with several negative stereotypes. She had an inquisitive mind and thus had many questions to which the answers were of the utmost importance. In her quest for answers, she ended up at our centre and spent three days with my wife and cousin, Burhana, at our home, asking questions and analysing our lifestyle. When she left, I felt she had found the answers she was searching for and was able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Soon afterwards, she not only embraced Islam, but also expressed her desire to promote a better image of the religion among her friends and members of her family. Mr. Zahoor Niazi, the then Editor of the *Daily Jang* and *The News London*, wrote a good account of the whole event which was later published in the UK edition of the paper.



Everything changed soon after the arrival of the 'group of four'.

He was staring at me raptly. I shook my head and tried to ignore his glare, yet he persisted with his stares. It happened too many times



to be random. We looked at each other and then I smiled and looked away. Then I felt his eyes follow me.

I had just concluded our meeting of the board of trustees at the centre. They were taken aback with my observations. I told them that I had witnessed suspicious activities and movements taking place inside the Centre. Most of them gave me a ridiculous disbelieving kind of look in the beginning. However, when I started dishing out more details such as the influx of certain people from different ethnicities directly related to Finsbury Park Mosque; although it was opened in the presence of HRH Prince Charles, it was linked to the likes of Abu Hamza, Abu Qatada, shoe bomber Richard Reid, and Zacarias Mous-saoui (only God knows what was going the minds of these people and what they were up to).

Finsbury Park had a direct tube connection to Stockwell on the Victoria line. I noticed them getting restless in their chairs and their eyes widened in surprise. I also informed them about a member of the group from the Finsbury Park Mosque who was inciting hatred towards the West and inviting them to join Jihadist groups. Their faces had contorted into a big question mark by the time the meeting was over. During the meeting, I was stuck because on the one hand I was apprehensive about the influx of people into the centre who wanted to promote Jihad in the UK, whereas on the other hand the same centre had invited religious leaders and groups in the past for various conferences that promoted Afghan Jihad, the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. We, in the West, were all praising Osama bin Laden, as a 'mu-jahedin legend', for his effective support to the West, the people of the Book from Abrahamic faiths, in bringing down the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR).



He was still present in the centre. Slowly and gradually, all attendees bade farewell after Isha (night) prayers, and hardly anyone was left in the grand hall of the centre. Oddly enough, the man was still there, and his eyes were fixed on me. Finally, when I locked the office door and intended an exit, I heard him for the first time.

‘Brother Toaha. I need to talk to you.’ Although he spoke in English, I detected a strong Arabic accent.

‘Can’t we discuss it sometime tomorrow if you don’t mind?’ I replied politely.

‘No. I want to speak to you right now.’ His voice turned hoarse. He started walking towards me, closing the gap between us with longer and longer strides until he stood in front of me, his face just a few inches away, feet pointed at me, his hands on his hips. Poker-faced, he greeted me with a blank but stern glare.

‘Brother, I just want to ask you what your problem with ‘Jihad’ is?’ His voice was cold... and then the penny dropped. He had been monitoring my Friday sermons for the last few weeks, and, now that I had realised what was going on, I recollected that he had been present at most of the sermons.

‘I have no problem with Jihad, brother,’ I replied while just about managing to smile. I continued, trying to keep my voice calm, ‘Jihad is a vital part of our belief. I am only concerned with Fasad (mischievousness/harm).’

‘Fasad?’ He gave me a quizzical look.

‘Yes brother,’ I replied firmly. ‘In accordance with Islamic teachings, there is a clear line of demarcation between Jihad Fee Sabeelillah (struggle in the path of Allah) and Fasad-fil-Ardh (disturbance and lawlessness on Earth). When the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979, most of the Islamic scholars declared it ‘Jihad’ while interpreting from the Holy Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Jihad, according to the Quran and Sunnah, is ridding the world of all tyranny, oppression, and lawlessness, following a set of principles from the Holy Quran.’

During my long narratives, I could see his face changing colour as certain emotions passed through his restless eyes. Nevertheless, I continued:

‘But the nature of the question has changed since the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan when the Muslims had fallen out among themselves on sectarian (Shiites and Sunnis) and ethnic grounds (Pashtun and Non-Pashtun), to some it was a proxy war between Iran and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Now the Muslims are killing each other for worldly gains. My heart goes all out to those who are losing

their lives on this script. I have spoken to many renowned Islamic scholars – from inside and outside the UK – that the whole war which is going on in Afghanistan doesn't fulfil the conditions of Jihad. I am worried about 'transporting' Jihadists from the UK and other European countries to Afghanistan in the name of Jihad, as it has become Fasad – when the clearly laid down principles are not adhered to. Those British Jihadists, who are actually Fasadists, will not only harm themselves but also the whole community living in the UK.' I wanted to be brief, but it was a so oft-repeated answer that it came out naturally, without much of an effort.

'O you who believe, shall I lead you to merchandise which will deliver you from a painful chastisement? You should believe in Allah and His Messenger and strive hard in Allah's way with your wealth and your lives.' He recited one verse from the Holy Quran while sizing me up with his eyes.

'Fight in the way of Allah those who fight against you but transgress not the limits.' I recited another verse from the Quran and felt his glare turning into a scowl. I coupled this verse with a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), '*A perfect Muslim is one from whose tongue and hands mankind is safe.* Brother, you must not forget that we are not living in Dar-ul-Harb as we have religious freedom, we have mosques, Islamic schools, Halal food, etc. The Government protects us, our properties, our mosques, etc. Men and women can wear their Islamic clothing without any issues.'

'What is Dar-ul-Harb?' he asked.

I explained to him that there are three types of states/lands one could live in. 'The lands where Muslims rule are known as **Dar-ul-Islam**, where the lives, property, wealth, religious freedom, etc. of non-Muslims, are protected by the government; and the lands where non-Muslims rule is known as **Dar-ul-Aman**, where the lives, property, wealth, religious freedom, etc. of Muslims are protected by the government. But the lands where non-Muslims rule and the lives, wealth, property, religious freedom, etc. are *not* protected by the government are known as **Dar-ul-Harb**. In a nutshell, Muslims are not being persecuted in the UK, so, what is the problem? Why is hatred being spread? Why the killing of innocent people; why Fasad, what you call Jihad?'

'Hmmm. I see where you are coming from, Brother.' Hussein wore a mocking grin for the first time. 'It is CIA and MI5 talking.'

'CIA and MI5?' I questioned him. 'Don't forget it was the CIA which co-sponsored Jihad in Afghanistan. It is complicated and we need to peel the layers of the onion to see through that puzzle.'

'There is no puzzle, Brother,' Hussein fumed. His face had contorted into a grotesque sneer. 'Stay out of it. This game is much bigger than you could anticipate. Look after the centre. Talk about Deen (religion) and don't risk yours and your family's lives!' He uttered the last sentence menacingly and then, thumping the floor with his foot, he left the hall.

This was my first encounter with the infamous Osman B. Hussein, also known as Hamdi Isaac, who committed the failed suicide bombing attack on 21 July 2005 in London with his four accomplices.

The Imam and Trustees of our Centre reported him and his accomplices, *The Four*, to the authorities in July 2003 (two years before he committed the heinous 21/7 attacks). Luckily, his attack was unsuccessful because the bomb-making 'mastermind' could not figure out basic mathematics. The initial investigation revealed that Osman failed to heat the hydrogen peroxide to the right temperature and was, therefore, unable to get the correct concentration required to detonate the bomb. He had fled to Italy after the failed attack; he was on the run. The Metropolitan Police visited the Centre, asking whether we had seen Osman in the Centre or if we knew of him. I was thunderstruck to learn that the contents of our letter were not perused carefully, which is evident from the fact that the police did not even know he had another name, Hamdi Isaac, which we had listed in our letter to them. The letter was sent as part of our Islamic duty to protect the Centre from terrorist groups and to ensure that the community at large was safe. Although after his arrest in Rome, he claimed that his bombs were a hoax as a demonstration against Iraq and were never meant to go off, he was sentenced to forty years imprisonment. His brother and his wife were also sentenced along with the other accomplices.

In the beginning, *The Four* used to get together only during the Friday prayers. In the initial days, no one seemed to have taken much notice of their group, but then in the coming weeks, they started to

multiply from four to eight and so on. It was then that they came to the notice of the elders.

Two of them were of Somali descent, tall and dark, sporting goatee beards. The third one was a slightly fair Algerian, whereas the fourth was a short, middle-aged Eritrean. Since they met regularly, yet seldom interacted with any of the elders in the Centre, it raised eyebrows. Even with their limited interaction, many young attendees were attracted to them. These included Somalians, Eritreans, Bangladeshis, Indians, Algerians, Moroccans, Afro-Caribbeans and Pakistanis. What astonished me was that many of those who interacted with them used to change their ideology within a couple of weeks and disappeared after their 'transformation'. No one would be able to tell us where they had gone.

Due to my hectic routine and many responsibilities at hand, I could not give proper attention in the beginning to *The Four* as I rarely had the time to monitor their activities. It was one strange afternoon when I heard them talking among themselves about something suspicious, that I had to pay attention.

'Kullu Halal Aakhee (Everything is Halal for us, Brother), their money, their property and their women, everything is Halal for us,' said an enthusiastic guy in the group.

'But is it permissible through Sharia, brothers?' asked a fifth guy, whom I had seen for the very first time at the Centre.

'Sharia, Brother? Sharia is an excuse for the weak. When the West kills us in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, and all other places, does it follow Sharia? The West robbed us of everything. They built these tall structures and their stock markets with our blood money. We must get all of it back with interest. That is why, Sheikh says that their women, their lives, and the property – everything is Halal on us.' The new guy received this frightening answer from one of *The Four*, which sent a cold shiver down my spine.

'We will take their money and enslave their women. We will transform London into Londonistan where everything will be permissible for us. The time has come which was predicted by our elders,' said the Eritrean, while punching his fist into the air in an angry manner.

The fifth guy wanted to say something in response but stopped himself soon after he laid his eyes on me. The rest, even though notic-

ing my presence, carried on brazenly and ignorantly with their discussion. The mystery of this discussion revealed itself to me after a few days as I realised that our Centre had become an important link in the 'golden triangle.'



Nizam was sitting in front of me, holding his head in his hands. His face was pale, drained of blood. Dark eye bags and wrinkles on his forehead had become more visible.

'This is what he left before leaving... ' he passed a piece of paper to me while carrying on with his sorrow, '... without saying anything to me, his mother, or his brother. O! God, Have Mercy on us!' his tone became hoarse and strained.

Nizam was among those Pakistanis who had left everything behind just to migrate to the UK in pursuit of making a fortune. In those days, the market for Off Licences was booming as these shops used to remain open till late at night, selling basic commodities along with alcohol. It was due to these off-licence businesses that Nizam now owned a number of such shops.

I tried to read the piece of paper that Nizam had passed to me. It was a scruffy, handwritten note by his son, addressed to him and his family with the following message:

*'I am leaving home and going for Jihad. Do not come after me. I don't want to be related to an alcohol seller.'*

These were the horrifying words of a young boy who was radicalised by *The Four* to turn his back on his family and his life. Nizam had one aim in life: to secure the future for his family, particularly his only son, who would continue his legacy.

I was staring at that piece of paper in utter shock; I just couldn't believe what I had read.

'This is indeed very worrying.' I tried to find the right words to console Nizam. 'Strange as it is, where can he go?' I asked.

'Strange?' Nizam was surprised by my inquiry. 'It is obvious that he went to Afghanistan, everyone knows that he must be there,' he replied.

‘But why Afghanistan?’ I asked, to get a sense of things.

‘This has been going on for a few years now. You don’t know about it? The Jihad paradox and the ‘Takfiri Gang?’ Nizam still seemed shocked at my lack of awareness about the issue.

After doing some research, I became aware of the *Golden Triangle*. This was a route being used by terrorists from the UK through Pakistan to Afghanistan and back again; many Muslims, and new Muslims, were taking part in this ‘noble cause’.

‘Did you inform the police or any other authority?’ I asked while refraining from digging into further details to calm down an agonised father.

‘What police and authorities? Why would they be worried about these things? This whole Jihad was once financed by the same western governments sparking a fire back in the region, and now the same fire has spread to many parts of the world, particularly the UK. This fire has burnt us, and it will continue to burn without anyone trying to put it out.’ Nizam’s tone became a bit harsh at this point.

This was when I realised that the matter was more complex than I had ever expected it to be.

### **Notes:**

*The definition of Jihad, through consultations with various eminent and celebrated Islamic scholars, was important for me to understand as well, as I had realized the phenomenon of Jihad, and its propagation was on the rise in the Muslim community in the UK, particularly among the converts (or reverts, as they often referred to themselves). Jihad was becoming a fashion for such people and many gangs, such as Muslim Boys, were being formed.*

*My further investigation enabled me to understand and analyse the situation better. Therefore, I spoke to my fellow trustees along with several national and international faith leaders, to engage them in a community cohesion programme. Hence, we organised our first conference under the title: **The Role of Mosques in the Development of Local Communities in 2000**, and a follow up conference: **The Role of Religions in Diminishing Terrorism in 2001**.*

# A Cry in the Wilderness

“

*Let's be careful with what we sow  
because we will harvest.*

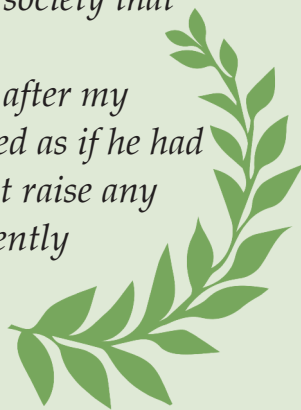
”

Hillary Clinton



*'This is the very same country that allowed this place to be used as a mosque where we are currently sitting and having this debate. Can you name a country where the state supports or encourages the building of minority worship places as the British government does? Our lives here are protected. We can practice our religion without any hindrance. Secondly, you have just told me that you are studying at a British university where this so-called 'KUFR' state will be paying for your fees. This is the same country that provides your education and basic needs without even questioning your faith or your religious background. Isn't this the concept of a welfare state where you want to emigrate, yet aren't even sure of a single Muslim state that provides such facilities? Your basic aim should not only be learning more about your religion, but also taking your formal education seriously in order to contribute positively towards the society that has given you so much.'*

*He nodded in affirmation soon after my discussion with him. It also seemed as if he had given in to my views as he did not raise any such question again and subsequently graduated with distinction.*



The mystery of the Golden Triangle unravelled itself after some time and I found out that it had been an integral part of the Muslim community in South London for the last two decades. The story started from the 1979 Soviet War in Afghanistan when the Soviets tried to invade Afghanistan and increase their influence (although it is still debatable whether the Soviets invaded Afghanistan or were officially invited by Hafizullah Amin's socialist government). In response, General Zia ul Haq of Pakistan, supported a CIA-led Western intervention and played a key role in promoting the notion of *Jihad* in Afghanistan. It was also decided by stakeholders of Afghan Jihad that Pakistan's status as an Islamic Republic would be used to make the country a frontline state in this Jihad. Funding from the Gulf and Western states poured into Pakistan to forge an alliance with the Islamic seminaries and train Jihadists to fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Fuelling the tension and ultimately causing the division of societies or clash of civilisations, the Russians were called Godless, devoid of religious leaders, etc. This Jihad was sponsored primarily by the money and weapons of the free world, especially the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and thus a deal was brokered at the cost of the blood of innocent Afghans. Even the former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, while confirming this fact, stated in Congress that Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were the outcome of the US strategy of countering Soviets in Afghanistan. She said:

*'We also have a history of kind of moving in and out of Pakistan. I mean, let's remember here: the people we are fighting today, we funded twenty years ago. And we did it because we were locked in this struggle with the Soviet Union. They invaded Afghanistan, and we did not want to see them control Central Asia, and we went to work, and it was President Reagan, in partnership with Congress, led by the Democrats, who said, 'You know what? Sounds like a pretty good idea! Let's deal with the ISI and the Pakistani military, and let's go recruit these Mujahideen! That's great! Let's get some to come from Saudi Arabia and other places, importing their Wahhabi brand of Islam, so that we can go beat the Soviet Union!' And guess what? They retreated, they lost billions of dollars, and it led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. So, there's a very strong argument which is: It wasn't a bad investment to end the Soviet Union but let's be careful what we sow...*

*because we will harvest. So, we then left Pakistan. We said, 'OK, fine. You deal with the Stingers that we've left all over your country. You deal with the mines that are along the border. And by the way, we don't want to have anything to do with you. In fact, we're sanctioning you.'*

In the early days of the Afghan Jihad, fighters from different nationalities, mainly Chechens, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Arabs, joined hands with the Afghans to counter the 'Soviet invaders'. Leaders of the Afghan Jihad, the Mujahideen, were warmly welcomed by the then US President, Ronald Reagan, who not only honoured them but also remarked that the meeting reminded him of the US Founders and Forefathers. According to him *'These gentlemen (Mujahideen) were the moral equivalents of the American forefathers.'* The honours didn't stop there. On March 22, 1982, the US President dedicated the US Space Shuttle, Columbia-2 to the Afghan freedom fighters (the Mujahideen).

I still remember the air and atmosphere surrounding different events and perspectives at that time. The people used to recite poems in praise of Osama bin Laden and conferences used to shed light on the valour and bravery of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. In those times, there used to be a famous poem entitled 'Mera Shair Osama bin Laden', meaning, 'My Lion Osama bin Laden', that used to play on a loop in every nook and corner of not only Pakistan but also the Western world. Below is a verse from a very long poem:

*Islam ka Hero Number 1*

(Islam's Hero Number One)

*Mera Shair Osama bin Laden*

(My Lion, Osama bin Laden)

*Islam pe wara tan man dhan*

(He sacrificed his body, soul and wealth for Islam)

*Mera Shair Osama bin Laden*

(My Lion, Osama bin Laden)

*Amrika Sahab Jaldi kero*

(O America! Hurry Up)

*Harmain se Niklo ghar Jao*

(Leave Makkah and Madina and go home)

*Do rahein meine chori hain*

(I have two options for you)  
*Ya ghar jao ya mar jao*  
 (Either go home or die)  
*Mai Arab k taptay sahra ko*  
 (I will turn the scorching Arabian Desert)  
*Goron ka bana doon ga madfan*  
 (Into westerners' graveyard) ...

The audio tapes of the same poem used to sell like hot cakes. It was as if whatever was going on in Afghanistan under Osama's dictates in Afghanistan was the real Islam, and participation in this war was the only way for one's salvation. But this enthusiasm of Muslims towards him was due to the hype that the media gave him as an 'Anti-Soviet Warrior' (as reported in *The Independent*, 6th December 1993).

The enthusiasm for defeating the Soviet Union was observed not only in the United States but also in the whole 'free world'. British intelligence agencies, the army and the Government equally contributed towards this 'holy obligation' of the Afghan Jihad. Even James Bond (*The Living Daylights*) went to Afghanistan in those days to lend a hand to Afghans in the holy war. The Mujahideen were being revered in blockbuster movies to have a positive psychological impact on the ordinary public. In the American hit movie, *Rambo III*, prior to the American war in Afghanistan, the ending of the movie was: 'This film is dedicated to the brave Mujahideen fighters of Afghanistan'. This was then edited to 'people of Afghanistan'. During the post 9/11 era, British Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher, was commonly known as the *Khala* (Aunt) of the Mujahideen. Influential elements of the 'free world' were promoting Jihad not only in London but also in other parts of the UK. In supporting the Government's strategy of intervention, many Imams and community leaders were contributing towards this 'noble cause', promoting the Afghan Jihad. Many Muslims based in the UK who were vying for Jihad were transported to Pakistan, and thereon moved to Afghanistan. That is how the Golden Triangle became remarkable and was known as such by the locals. This Triangle remained conspicuous throughout the war with the blessings of the *Free World*.

And then, as everyone knows, the Free World succeeded in defeating the Soviets, hence their disintegration. As Jihad became a billion-dollar industry, it carried on even after the Soviet disintegration. Though the *Free World* stopped its explicit support for Jihad, the movement of Jihadists from the UK and Pakistan into Afghanistan went on unchecked. Subsequently, other stakeholders and gangs also entered this profitable industry, mainly due to returns through drug trafficking related businesses associated with the Afghan war. On the other hand, an identity crisis was created, and Muslims were becoming disenfranchised by radicals. Muslims became used to being emotionally charged through the atrocities in Palestine and Kashmir. Many young Muslims revolted against their families in the UK and went to Pakistan to fulfil their *perceived obligation* of joining this 'noble cause' of Jihad. During this period, many white and black Britons and Americans were converted to Islam and joined militant outfits in the region.

Mosques in the UK, such as the Finsbury Park Mosque in North London, were being taken over by radicals and used as hubs for Jihadist recruitment. Moderate trustees were abused, harassed, and eventually thrown out from the management. Such centres were openly criticising the Western and the British style of life. One group even went to the extent of saying that it wanted to hoist the flag of Islam at 10 Downing Street and hang the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in Trafalgar Square. Any resistance from the moderate Muslims was dealt with through force and threats by the radicals such as Abu Hamza and his group.

The movement that had started was spreading fast, from North to South and East to West. Its potential victims were our youth and those who were disenfranchised, for one reason or another, and were struggling with an Identity Crisis. This vulnerable youth could have been *easily manipulated* due to lack of education and knowledge of the religion they espoused. Interestingly, some of the Muslim movements had African British converts at their forefront. There were no quick fixes as to why they were converting; but experts believed that the reasons could range from theological and emotional to cultural motivations. Many converts suggested that Islam had given meaning to their lives and gave them a new righteous path to follow.

Others said that their faith provided inspiration and strength to engage with a materialistic society in a better manner. Islam further gave them decisiveness on a range of religious and socio-cultural matters. From my own personal experience, I encountered many converts who preferred to be called reverts, and not converts. This was because of their pre-conceived notions that their ancestors (who emigrated to Europe as slaves centuries ago) had Islam as their primary religion and they were forced to take on a new religious identity and thus they were reverting to the religion of their forefathers.

But even with all these positive ideas, some also thought of this idea of conversion not as love for Islam but as a scheme of revenge. Nizam and his revelations had opened my eyes. I knew that a bigger storm was brewing at our doors.



Sleepless nights had plagued me over the last few days. The *miscreant group* was frequently visiting the Centre. Now 'The Four' were bringing a dozen more youngsters along with them. They were regularly coming for Friday prayers and sometimes used to interrupt the sermon as well. Many of them thought that Britain had become 'Dar ul Harb', the land where Muslims were being persecuted, and thus it was mandatory for Muslims to perform *hijra (migration)* from the UK.

## Dialogue with a Radical Youth

I analysed the situation as a trustee of the Stockwell Green Muslim Centre. I knew that with the saga of the *Gang of Four* and the unease of radical youth towards my stance on various critical issues, I would encounter many emotional people who would confront and ask me to clarify where I stood. It was one such day when an Eritrean boy,

probably in his early twenties, stopped me while I was leaving for home after Friday prayer.

'I need to talk to you urgently on a serious issue,' said the young man in an emotional manner.

'Okay, let us sit down, but I won't be able to give you much time since I'm already running late.' I succumbed to his gaze and took him to my office to find out what he was up to and asked him the reason for his urgency.

'Mr. Qureshi, I am thinking of doing Hijra (emigration) from England, which is a Kufr (infidel) country.' He uttered these words in a loud voice in my office. It sent me into complete shock.

'Why?' I asked him.

'What are these people doing to the Muslim world, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan?'

I suddenly realised that this was a delicate situation and needed to be dealt with in a prudent manner. My answers had to be thought through, but I realised that rather than argue with him, I should first ask him a few questions.

'Okay, that sounds fine. Where would you like to emigrate to?' I inquired.

'Hmmm, I don't know, but I think we should leave this country as soon as possible.

'What do you think about Saudi Arabia, or any other Gulf State? Their economies are good, and they have implemented Sharia as well. Haven't they?' I waited for his reply. He took a long pause and gave my question a lot of thought before answering,

'Saudi Arabia? Not at all. It is a Western puppet. I would never go there.'

'Oh, really? Why not move to Pakistan or Afghanistan?' I posed another question.

'Are you serious? Afghanistan is extremely insecure, whereas Pakistan is also playing into the hands of the USA. General Pervez Musharraf, the President of Pakistan, is another puppet, just like the Saudi king,' he replied, again seemingly hesitant to move to the countries that I proposed.

'So, with these options out of the equation, we are left with Sudan and Egypt. What do you think about that?' I knew this was the climax

of our conversation and I had brought the vulnerable young man to a point where I could influence his mind-set.

'Are you out of your mind? Who would even think of going to Sudan when it's going through a civil war?' he nervously replied whilst also running out of answers. This was my moment to turn the tide and expose his immature preconceptions.

'It looks like you're unable to decide on a place. But for starters, I will join you. Let's pack our bags and leave this country tomorrow. What do you say?' I asked, putting him in a difficult situation.

'Hmmm... I don't think I'll be able to do that instantly as my university exams are at hand and I have still two years to complete my undergraduate studies. After getting the degree, I need to work for a couple of years and save some money. After that I will be able to do Hijra,' he responded while scratching his head.

That was the moment when I thought it was important to let him know my real intention behind entertaining his conversation.

'Look, son, I understand where you are coming from in terms of your confusion. Someone may have instilled this idea of Hijra in your mind apprising you a lot of things about the negativities of this country or how this country may be functioning against the Muslims. But let me tell you something...

'This is the very same country that allowed this place to be used as a mosque where we are currently sitting and having this debate. Can you name a country where the state supports or encourages the building of minority worship places as the British government does? Our lives here are protected. We can practice our religion without any hindrance. Secondly, you have just told me that you are studying at a British university where this so-called 'KUFRA' state will be paying for your fees. This is the country that provides your education and basic needs without even questioning your faith or your religious background. Isn't this the concept of a welfare state that you want to leave, yet aren't even sure of a single Muslim state that provides such facilities? Your basic aim should not only be learning more about your religion, but also taking your formal education seriously to contribute positively towards the society that has given you so much.'

He nodded in affirmation soon after listening to my advice. It also seemed as if he had given in to my views as he did not raise any such



question again and graduated with distinction.

This conversation was not a one-off incident; I had many discussions with other young Muslims who had been intoxicated by radicals in London, and this presented not only a challenge to us, but also helped us to understand different facets of the Muslim community which an Imam, who could not speak English, would not have understood.



Several Muslim gangs were also being formed in Brixton such as South Muslim Syndicate (SMS), Peel Dem (Them) Crew (PDC), Muslim boys (A faction of PDC broke off to convert to Islam), Grand Brigade, Bang Bang Taliban, and Hot Jihadis. A fairly substantial number of gang members were involved in crimes such as purse snatching, vandalism, and even murder, but had found inspiration for Jihad in just a couple of meetings with the radical preachers to spread terror against their enemy gangs. After a huge rise in criminal gangs hiding behind the name of Islam to commit crimes, I was interviewed in March 2005 (before the suicide bombing of July 2005) by *The Guardian*. The group had become known as the Muslim Boys – it covered areas of Stockwell, Brixton, Peckham, etc. It was formed from members who had converted to Islam, some of them in prison, from other gangs such as PDC, SMS, SC, etc.

One of the problems was that the media and government had hyped up Al Qaeda and other terror groups to such an extent that they were always in the news. The unfortunate consequence of this was that the terror groups were becoming celebrities, and it was fashionable to be identified with them. Just as rap culture had become synonymous with gang culture, Islam and terrorism had become synonymous, due to the constant use of words such as Islamic terrorism/terrorists. These criminals realised that linking themselves to terrorism would cause the public to fear them more,

an increased intimidation factor. In music, one would hear rappers refer to the AK47 assault rifle and Pakistan, as well as their ability to 'send for the Taliban'.

I had briefed *The Guardian* that since 9/11, Muslims were under tremendous pressure. Young people were disaffected, and it was up to statutory institutions and community leaders to guide these youngsters toward worthwhile diversionary and preventative programmes, including education, employment, and mentoring. These local gangs, camouflaging themselves under the banner of Islam, were travelling to Afghanistan through Pakistan just to lay claim to links with terrorists. I clearly recall a young teenager who had come to one of our youth sessions boasting of his selfies with guns – claiming that he had been 'chilling with G's in Afghanistan'. These British born youngsters had returned with the ideology of forced conversions, taxation on non-Muslims, converting certain areas to 'Muslim only' estates, and they were involved in robbing, drug dealing, and attacking innocent people.

Further, flaws in the British foreign policy, and its inaction over Palestine and Kashmir, were also used as one of the reasons to incite vulnerable youth against the Government.

One of the worst incidents was when Osman B Hussein and his friends painted a Qur'anic verse in green on a commercial building belonging to a Jew next to our Centre, which insisted upon *killing, and getting killed, in the path of Allah*. This incident created unease and tension in the local community, as many feared violence from the radical members of the Centre. As a result, a school near the Centre declined our request for extension and provision of our road that would allow a double entrance into the Centre.

I met many learned scholars to grasp the conditions for Jihad. The average Muslim would like to know: When is Jihad obligatory? When should it be called for? Can a non-Muslim state call for Jihad in another country? What is the status and purpose of pro-Jihad sermons in that regard? What should be the strategy considering the points of difference in British and Sharia laws? What are the conditions for becoming a Jihadist?

For me, these questions were also important as I was a staunch

believer of Jihad, a fight against one's own self for improvement, but it was not this version of Jihad that was intoxicating the youth, contributing towards their radicalisation. For me, Jihad was what the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) preached, saying, *'The best mujahid (striver/fighter) is he who carries out Jihad (strives) against his own nafs (inner desires) in the obedience of God Almighty.'*

I discovered that violent groups were uniting in the name of Jihad and, they were covering up their violent activities under the same umbrella. It was clear that one of the main conditions for Jihad was not being met, that is that the lives, property, and worship places of Muslims were not being persecuted by the government. Instead, their main aim was to bring up a generation that believed in hate and violence, inspired by feelings of revenge and an inferiority complex – eventually bringing a bad name to all Muslims.

One could argue that British foreign policy had many flaws, but this could be addressed as part of the existing political system. In fact, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) had started outreach work with the Muslim community – it was the first time that the FCO was inclined to give a patient hearing to the core issues. These violent groups never realised that taking up arms would make Muslims, generally become the prime suspects for law enforcement agencies. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) had already been established in 1997 to create awareness among British Muslims. Most members of the Muslim community welcomed this development and were in constant contact with Government institutions to get feedback and community insights.

One day, amid all these chaotic developments, I told myself, *when a house in a street catches fire, it poses the danger of burning down the whole street if not put out on time. If someone does not do anything to counter the wrong teachings used to intoxicate the young British Muslims, the Muslim community would soon be alienated...*

I realised that something had to be done. It was not the time to inform others about a violent storm in the offing; it was about doing something ourselves to block the way of this storm.



This was our fourth meeting in this regard. I wondered how we could get the community together as ONE, removing the barriers of partition. I kept quiet for a while. All the four trustees had been looking after the centre. They were more than satisfied with my arrival as I had rejuvenated the whole premises, giving it a new lease of life. They also agreed with my views on Radical Jihad and its negative consequences for the British Muslim community. But when I informed them about the Centre's disconnect from the local community and the need to arrange a conference on *The Role of Mosques in the Development of Local Communities*, which would have speakers from all walks of life and faiths, their resistance to my idea started.

'Mr. Qureshi, what are you saying?' asked the first trustee, rubbing his forehead in confusion.

'We would be given a tough time if that happens and there would be nothing but humiliation for us.' The second trustee also nodded in approval of the first.

'We know you want to stop this fire from spreading but allowing Jews and Christians in our centre would be nothing less than disrespect for a number of Muslims in the community,' said the third trustee in a slightly controlled manner.

The fourth trustee kept quiet.

'We are on the same page,' I responded. 'Let me reiterate. We are British Muslims, and we practice our religion freely without restraints and thus we should appreciate that fact. Yes, there are certain things in British foreign policy which the Muslim community, as well as non-Muslims, do not like, but this does not mean that we should resort to violence. The non-Muslims, who are also against these British policies, do not resort to violence. Rather, we should use democratic means to send our message to Parliament through local representatives.'

It was then that the fourth trustee spoke and said, 'Yes, we agree

with you on this but you are also talking about inviting Jews and Christians to this centre.'

I understood the trustees' concerns and replied, 'I see dark shadows hovering over the centre soon. You know the incident of the Jewish neighbour's wall and how I had to speak to him personally, requesting him to support the mosque. There were genuine concerns from the local community. Our Friday prayer creates some traffic issues, yet the community is showing its patience. As you all may know, there was a famous story when a Christian delegation stayed and prayed in the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) mosque in Madinah.'

I paused to regain my breath.

'If the locals are informed about our activities and invited to take part, it will help create community cohesion. We need to take this initiative now. I am just planning for the future,' I concluded, emphasising my last sentence.

After my prolonged entreaties and debate, they agreed to hold the conference at the Centre under the title of *The Role of Mosques in the Development of Local Communities*.



Organising the conference sparked a new debate. Not only the Trustees but also the frequent visitors of the Centre were in a state of shock as to why and how non-Muslims would be invited to speak at the main hall of the Mosque. However, local priests, scholars, and councillors, along with organisations from local faith network, took a keen interest in organising the conference. Selection of guest speakers, along with appropriate topics for discussion, was another milestone to be achieved. When I recommended the names of the then Minister for Sport, Kate Hoey, MP and the High Commissioner of Pakistan to the UK and Ireland, Professor Akbar S Ahmed, Sitara-E-Imtiaz, there were sarcastic smiles on my peers' faces as no one expected such dignitaries to attend such a conference.

In my very first meeting with Kate Hoey, I was successful in getting her consent to attend the conference. She not only seemed surprised and happy, but it felt like it was the first time she had been invited by a Muslim-led organisation to speak at a conference in a Mosque.

The next step, which seemed relatively difficult, was meeting and convincing Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed to speak at the conference. I had this presumption that, due to his status as High Commissioner, he might have a superiority complex which was something frequently observed among the big bosses of third world countries, and it would even be difficult to meet him, let alone convince him to attend the conference. Surprisingly, it was not difficult to arrange a meeting with him and once I met him, all my presumptions and clichés about public servants from Pakistan were shattered. I was particularly impressed by his modesty and humility. His intellectual ingenuity and erudition were dominant over his official position. He listened to me attentively and despite the specified time of one hour, our meeting continued for more than two hours. He agreed with the fact that radicalisation was eating the Pakistani and British societies and thus grass root actions needed to be taken, especially from the religious circles. He was delighted to observe that we knew the intricacies of the problem and thus he was willing to help us.

‘The community development initiatives that you are pursuing are admirable and I would love to be a part of it,’ he said. ‘You need to take short leaps rather than giant ones as the communities, as well as the authorities, may not be able to understand the sensitivities and impact associated with your work. This is my personal mobile number, give me a call at any time and I will be there as this is a joint cause.’ His approach made my eyes sort of teary and moist as I was deeply moved at that moment.



The conference was a success beyond our expectations.

For the neighbours, convening a conference was pleasant news. They were used to witnessing the centre doors open without having any idea as to what was going on inside. But this conference helped in changing many of their perceptions about the centre and Muslims. As expected, Professor Ahmed, Kate Hoey, MP, along with other renowned speakers spoke on various pressing issues and highlighted the role of the mosque in the development of local communities. Professor Ahmed lamented that Islam was not being practised in its true sense and thus there was a need for further education, awareness, and cooperation within the local community. He said that gaining knowledge was important in Islam, with the word *knowledge* being the second most often used word in the Quran after the word *God*. Kate Hoey, MP, also emphasised the need for arranging such inter-faith initiatives in the future. She was of the view that the authorities must reach out to the local communities, especially the Young Muslims, to join politics. Dr ZU Khan, formerly Regional Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), dwelt upon the fact that Islam was the first religion to clearly lay down anti-discrimination laws for mankind. Speaking on the occasion, I proposed that religious organisations and centres needed to be proactive rather than reactive. The authorities as well as the mosques and centres must reach the local communities to curb any feelings of alienation.

The conference concluded on a positive note - that there was a need to develop understanding among the communities and emphasised the importance of harmonious relations for a better and bright future.

This conference laid a foundation for us to strengthen our endeavours in working in partnership with statutory bodies and other faith groups.

More than forty local British people, along with African British participants, took part in the conference. This event was one of the most positive things to have come out of the growing chaos around us and our centre. On the evening of that same day, the *Group of Four* visited the Centre again, looking angry and agitated. I knew that my message from the conference went where I wanted it to go.



Soon after the success of the first conference, we started cooperating and working with other religious groups and set up the Stockwell Faith Forum. This forum gave us the idea of arranging another conference, planned for October 2001, entitled *The Role of Religions in Diminishing Terrorism*.

‘Mr. Qureshi what is this?’ an old attendee asked. ‘This title implies that Religion and Terrorism are interconnected.’

I responded politely. ‘Look, brothers, we should think rationally. We should not adopt apologetic behaviour. I know that extremism and terrorism stem from political manoeuvres and not on religious grounds, but we also have examples where both were related. Take the example of Menachem Begin, a Jew and founder of the Israeli Right Wing Likud party, and Gerry Adams, a Catholic and former President of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) – Sinn Fein, who were once involved in terrorism, depending upon which side you are on and your definition of terrorism, This is because a terrorist is a freedom fighter for another, with their main motivation stemming from religion. I recommended this title so that the religious representatives of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith, could talk frankly on how religions could help in countering terrorism.’

Another debate started in the Centre on the back of arrangements for the second conference. But because of our previous success, I fortunately received agreement on arranging the second conference. It was also suggested that notable religious scholars and experts from Pakistan should also be invited and to help with this, local Muslim businessmen agreed to sponsor the conference.

For this follow-up conference, and after consulting the centre trustees, we invited religious representatives, cross-party members of parliament, professors, university students, and police officials to spread our message as far as possible. Several attendees volunteered to help us in arranging the conference, and Gulshan and the kids were at the forefront of these arrangements. The *Group of Four* was



unseen for quite some time.

I received a call from Talha on 11 September 2001, when he was in central London.

'Dad, USA is under attack. I am quickly going home,' said Talha as if he was running for his life, despite the attacks occurring thousands of miles away.

I didn't grasp the seriousness of the situation since I was busy in a meeting for the conference and was unable to catch up with the day's news.

A mere two hours later, the Police Borough Commander, accompanied by four other officers, was standing at the main entrance of the Centre, looking worried and disturbed.

'Mr. Qureshi, terrorists have struck the US with a major attack. We were told that you are arranging a conference soon and I have come to warn you that you will have to postpone your conference for the time being,' said the Commander.

I looked at him with a terrified face and realised that things had started crumbling in a matter of moments. The 9/11 attacks had happened. The USA had changed. So, too, had the rest of the world.

# O Thee, Warrior, it's Time for Your Sacrifice

“

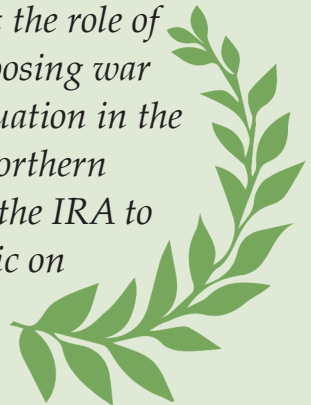
*Knowing when to fight is just as  
important as knowing how.*

”

**Terry Goodkind,**  
Faith of the Fallen

*“I present a Christian perspective. I am now worried about the alienation of the young Muslims in society. I have sympathy with my distressed Muslim friends because of the September 11 attacks with which they are unjustly associated. We who claim faith and nearness to God can help provide the unifying values which a multicultural society needs.’*

*In my opening remarks, I explained various similarities between the three Abrahamic faiths. I also emphasised the need to distinguish between terrorists and freedom fighters, as history has proven time and again that today’s terrorist can be tomorrow’s freedom fighter, by quoting examples of Nelson Mandela, Menachem Begin, Yasser Arafat, etc. I made reference to the Good Friday Agreement between Britain and Northern Ireland, which was a big achievement that only came through dialogue between the two. The central points to the agreement were sovereignty, civil and cultural rights, decommissioning of weapons, justice, and policing. I also pointed out that the role of the international community in choosing war over dialogue would worsen the situation in the coming years. Learning from the Northern Ireland peace process and bringing the IRA to the negotiating table, I was emphatic on dialogue with the Taliban.”*



The September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre transformed the world, and its preliminary shockwaves were also being felt in the UK.

Initially, there were no clues about the motives and perpetrators of this horrific attack but when the clouds of smoke receded, it shocked the entire world that the attackers were none other than Muslims. All hell broke loose for the Muslim community as each one of us was looked at with suspicion. Al Qaeda, from being known as a small outfit, became the number one American enemy as it was the chief culprit in the 9/11 strikes. The former CI- trained 'warrior', Osama bin Laden, was now the most wanted terrorist. The US Government and the Pentagon were now preparing for a trans-Atlantic operation to apprehend the 9/11 mastermind.

But there were several conspiracy theorists who challenged the US claim and called it an inside job by way of controlled demolition (Summers and Swan 2011). The 9/11 attacks were not only one of the biggest global shocks but also a political game changer. The repeated images of the planes crashing into the twin towers, the loss of thousands of innocent lives, and the involvement of Muslims in the attacks, were sending bad omens for things to happen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What a terrible start it was!

Muslims were constantly being bracketed with extremism and terrorism in the world media. It had become known that the hijackers consisted of nineteen men, made up of fifteen citizens of Saudi Arabia; two citizens of the United Arab Emirates; one Egyptian and one Lebanese. None of the hijackers was Afghan. Nevertheless, it soon became obvious that the mighty USA would do nothing less than invade Afghanistan to take revenge on Al Qaeda and its allies. The invasion of Afghanistan by the US-led coalition was like the writing on the wall. The aftershocks of this incident were borne by the Muslim communities in the Western world; the suspicion was now firmly upon them, no matter what their respective backgrounds were. Certain narratives against Muslims such as *Crusades against Islamic Terrorism*, bolstered by the then US President, George W Bush, were at the forefront of global media.

News stories relating to 9/11 and Muslims were exaggerated to an extent that Muslims in the UK started feeling insecure and

terrified. Every person with a beard was looked upon with distrust as if they were somehow a perpetrator of this tragedy... so much that even I was called Osama bin Laden on certain occasions! Ironically, due to the lack of education and knowledge, people of other religions (such as Sikhs) were also subject to this psychological trauma as they were mistaken for Muslims. This enigma continues even now. Far-right extremism and religious hatred was on the rise, and Muslims in the UK and in Europe were suffering from an identity crisis. Many youngsters rediscovered their Muslim identity. The hostile environment provided by various sectors of society, particularly the media, reminded Muslims of their identity. The more people attacked Islam for being incompatible with British values, the more Muslims defended their religion for being peaceful. This politicised, disenfranchised, and radicalised Muslim youth even more.

As the names and identities of those involved in the attacks were revealed, the attendees started staying in their homes. An elderly Bengali gentleman, who used to regularly attend the Morning Prayers, was harassed and shouted at by far right extremists. After the incident, he stopped coming for prayers. To keep themselves safe, people started to part ways with the centre, though many still attended the prayers regularly. The shocks from 9/11 and its consequences were evident from those who attended prayers. Many of them also believed in conspiracy theories and for them it was a well thought out plan to demonise Muslims and Islam, believing that Muslims had nothing to do with it.

But whatever the motive and reason behind 9/11, one thing was for sure; Muslims around the world were bracing themselves for tougher times to come.

The once *Warrior of Islam*, Osama bin Laden, was now the most wanted terrorist in the world. People who used to sing his praises shied away from even uttering his name. The biggest casualty of Osama and his actions were not the Americans, but Muslims around the world and Islam. His actions were generalised and attributed to the whole Muslim world. Narratives such as *Islamic Terrorism*, *Islamic Extremism*, *Islamic Radicalism*, *Islamists*, *Jihadists*, were used so excessively that laymen started bracketing Terrorism, Radicalism and Extremism only with Islam. This was something which took the

dwindling sails of the ships of the Muslim world into the eye of the storm. Being a British Pakistani Muslim, I felt as if someone had pulled the rug from under our feet. Our work on community cohesion and counter radicalisation was being deconstructed, and I couldn't let that happen. But what could I do? The struggle was back on.

It was only a matter of time before the US started its Afghan invasion. It used Article 51 of the UN Charter to justify its invasion. Critics raised their concerns that the Article only permits a state to attack in self-defence and despite Afghanistan not being an aggressor state, America attacked illegally. Although it was understood that Osama, being the head of Al Qaeda, was seeking refuge in Afghanistan, none of the perpetrators was from there. However, this was another critical technical debate which many in the world policy quarters were hesitant to discuss. After two months of the US Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan which started on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2001, the United Nations Security Council approved the formation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) for Afghanistan, which was also later joined by NATO forces.

America had hastily decided to invade Afghanistan without having a well thought through exit strategy, and even to this day the US government is paying the social and economic price for this miscalculation. General Nick Carter, Deputy Commander of the NATO-led coalition, made a confession: 'I think that at that stage, if we had been very prescient, we might have spotted that a final political solution to what started in 2001, from our perspective, would have involved getting all Afghans to sit round the table and talk about their future. The problems that we have been encountering over the period since then are essentially political problems, and political problems are only ever solved by people talking to each other.'



At the request of the Metropolitan Police, we postponed our conference on *The Role of Religions in Diminishing Terrorism*, which was scheduled to be held in October 2001. Had the 9/11 attacks not happened, our conference would have attracted minimum attention from the authorities. But in the aftermath of those attacks, an event with such a theme, arranged particularly by Muslims, was indeed newsworthy.

Re-arranging this kind of conference for January 2002 was difficult as many trustees and attendees were not in favour of arranging such a conference in the prevailing hostile and volatile atmosphere.

The opinions floating around were that such a conference would legitimise a link between Islam with terrorism being propagated by the media, and that it would not be wise to arrange such a conference as Muslims the authorities were already in a state of shock and disbelief.

But my take on this issue was altogether different.

I responded to their reservations: 'In terms of militancy and the current scenario, we are ahead of time, as we had already arranged such a conference before 9/11 to create awareness against radicalisation. Additionally, if we don't arrange such events and shy away from condemning such barbaric acts, we WILL have a bad name associated with us. At least this way we can try to prevent it.'

I continued, 'Imagine the repercussions if, God forbid, something like 9/11 was to happen in the UK.'

They listened to what I was saying and cautiously agreed at the end. It was after two weeks of discussions that the dates for the upcoming conference were fixed.



The conference was held on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2002 and it received unprecedented levels of response and appreciation. Parliamentarians from major political parties and representatives of universities, faith groups, peace movements, and local authorities participated. Notable

speakers included Labour MP, Kate Hoey, Liberal Democrat MP, Dr Jenny Tong (now Baroness), Conservative, John Whelan, Metropolitan Police Commander, Brian Paddick (now Lord), Council Leader, Tom Franklin, renowned historian, Barrister Thomson and well-known Christian leader, Geoffrey Wilcox. The most interesting participant was the veteran journalist, Yvonne Ridley, who had been a Taliban captive and converted to Islam after she was freed. Ridley shared the experience of her Taliban captivity and contrasted how well she was treated compared with how the US treated its prisoners of war. She thought that for the American policymakers, one American life was far more important than the 9000 Afghans killed by them because of US bombings.

The conference analysed religions and terrorism. The most satisfying outcome was that participants rejected the notion of linking terrorism with religion. They appreciated and promoted the message of peace through this conference and emphasised that the media should not be used by world powers to spread feelings of hatred and warmongering to reduce religious and racial hatred at home. We all joined in thoroughly condemning this practice.

Kate Hoey, MP, echoed our idea of interacting with the law-abiding Muslim community and proposed to include them in the policy making process to counter radicalisation. She rejected the idea of Islamic terrorists and said that terrorists were only terrorists, without any association to a particular faith.

Dr. Jenny Tong, MP, spoke passionately about the plight and miseries of the poor in the underdeveloped countries. She also raised concerns about new forms of terror because the 9/11 attacks proved that one does not need to have nuclear weapons to inflict significant losses upon a powerful federal republic such as the United States.

Metropolitan Police Commander, Brian Paddick, said that Islamic terrorism was a contradictory term as Islam was not a religion that provoked or encouraged violence. He was hopeful that the strong Islamic community present in the UK would not scare Britain and that the same community could help in countering extremism.

Mr. John Whelan from the Conservative Party shed light, from his Jewish perspective, on the Israel-Palestine crisis and said that a unified international solution could lead towards peace. John thought



that if Israel stood rigid on its stance there was no hope for an amicable solution of the problem, which would provide further fuel to the raging fire of extremism.

Rev. Jeffery Wilcox also made a number of important observations.

‘I present a Christian perspective. I am now worried about the alienation of young Muslims in society. I have sympathy with my distressed Muslim friends because of the September 11 attacks with which they are unjustly associated. We who claims faith and nearness to God can help provide the unifying values which a multicultural society needs.’

In my opening remarks, I explained various similarities between the three Abrahamic faiths. I also emphasised the need to distinguish between terrorists and freedom fighters, as history has proven repeatedly that today’s terrorist can be tomorrow’s freedom fighter, by quoting examples of Nelson Mandela, Menachem Begin, Yasser Arafat, etc. I made reference to the Good Friday Agreement between Britain and Northern Ireland, which was a big achievement that only came through dialogue between the two. The central points to the agreement were sovereignty, civil and cultural rights, decommissioning of weapons, justice, and policing. I also pointed out that the role of the international community in choosing war over dialogue would worsen the situation in the coming years. Learning from the Northern Ireland peace process and bringing the IRA to the negotiating table, I was emphatic on dialogue with the Taliban:

‘Let me tell you that most of these terrorist movements do not stem from religion but from injustices, uncalled for conflicts and flawed foreign policies. Religions preach respect for human lives. As the Quran says, *‘whosoever killeth a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, 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.’* We must remind the world powers to solve ongoing conflicts such as Palestine, Kashmir, and others, in a neutral manner. This will ultimately address the disaffection among the Muslim community, hence there will be less room for those radicalising the youth. Furthermore, there should be a concerted effort to feed the peace agenda into the government’s ministerial

structure. We can expect to face situations like 9/11 in the UK if British foreign policy carries on with the same deficiencies, as it is one of the major tools for radicalisers to pull vulnerable Muslim youth into the menace of violence.'

The resounding impact of my statement was self-evident across the hall.

At the end of this conference, all the participants agreed that the religious leadership of Islam, Judaism and Christianity should promote peace, and that there were a handful of elements that used their respective religions in the wrong way. Great emphasis was placed on the need for effective dialogue over the use of force. Also, the authorities were urged to start outreach work in Muslim communities and help them to further integrate into mainstream society.

The significance of this conference was in its arrangement four years prior to the London bombings. We had started advocacy campaigns for bringing the local authorities on board as we knew trouble was brewing in the form of radicalisation which needed to be countered.



The *Takfiri Gang* was also in full flow and their activities were on the rise. The Afghan war presented them with new fuel for the raging fire of violence as they used the notion of Taliban fighting the infidel invaders in Afghanistan, likening their campaign to them. They were using the same fire to spread their agenda of Jihad.

Umar Bakri and Abu Hamza were using their platforms to spread their message of hate. Bakri, a Syrian born radical, was a member of the Hizb ut Tehrir and founder of Al Muhajirun, a radical group that originated in Saudi Arabia in 1983.

Bakri was arrested and then expelled from Saudi Arabia in 1986 and had since then been living in exile in the UK. When Hizb ut Tehrir suspended him, he used Al Muhajirun's platform to propagate

his extremist narrative. He used to visit our Centre in Stockwell quite often as well.

We received the information that an event was about to be held at the Finsbury Park Mosque, where Abu Hamza was in charge, on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2002, in London with the title of '9/11... a historic day.' This mosque was about half an hour away from our Stockwell Green Centre by direct Victoria line underground. Therefore, some of the attendees of the Centre took part in it. When they returned from the event, they looked scared, with pale faces. I was told that the event was arranged to honour the 9/11 bombers and they were praised during the event. Furthermore, the speakers at the event commended their bravery for fighting against '*The Devil*'. It was also decided that the mosques in the UK would be used to foster the feeling of Jihad among young Muslims.

Glorification of terrorism and condoning the barbaric acts of 9/11 from a mosque was another twist in the dark phase of hawks.



Then, what we had long feared finally happened. *The Four* had become a band of many young fanatics, with different languages, ages, and nationalities. They used to sit in a corner after Friday prayers and condemn both the Centre management as well as British Foreign Policy. For them, our mosque was Anti-Jihad, and the management was a puppet of the British Government. Slowly and gradually, we also heard rumours that schemes were being prepared to replace the old trustees with new ones to get a hold over the Centre, just like they had done at the Finsbury Park Mosque by force. Their main aim was to get control over as many British mosques as they could to establish camps for violent teaching. Young men were intoxicated against western governments and motivated to fight against the very Government that was feeding them and taking care of them, as most of them were unemployed or were studying under government grants.

Anthems of violence were being played in the mosques. I was constantly in touch with scholars over the matter as my nightmares were turning into reality. A joint effort had to be made to stop it.

In 2002, my fellow trustees and I decided to lodge a complaint with the authorities against radical elements at the centre. Finsbury Park Mosque was already under the radical regime. Brixton Mosque already had a bad name due to some 'questionable' people who were its attendees, and our Stockwell Centre was their next target.

The leadership of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), a leading umbrella body of mosques, was urging the authorities on a regular basis to stop hate speeches by people like Abu Hamza. But what actions were being taken by the authorities against the extremists? That was indeed a million-dollar question.



The Metropolitan Police Commander, holding his hat and scratching his head, was talking to me, my fellow trustees, and members of the Muslim community.

'Look, Mr. Qureshi, I am aware of your concerns, but what can I do? I must be honest with you. My hands are tied. We are policemen and not some counter terror security experts.' He sounded serious now. 'Look at this form; it's filled in on a day-to-day basis. It has categories for all sorts of crimes including theft, robberies, domestic violence, rapes, etc. There is no section for terrorism or extremism. We cannot arrest people unless they commit a crime,' he continued while telling us that he was unable to file our complaint as it was not under his domain. Nevertheless, he assured me of passing on this complaint to Scotland Yard.

This was our fourth meeting with the Police Commander. The Centre was facing troubles as young people, inspired by the extremely politicised ideology of Abu Hamza and Bakri, were also visiting the mosque, adding to our problems. These people were interrupting our regular proceedings and lectures and spreading

hate-filled views. They were distributing anti-West booklets to the attendees and trying to force us to preach and talk about their perverted interpretation of Jihad in the UK on a regular basis. Those who refused to oblige were harassed.

The most frightening scene was while coming from my house to the mosque for the morning prayers. I saw eight to ten young people working out in military fashion in the main hall of the Centre, as if they were training for some clandestine operations. This was a clear indication that armed training of the Jihadists had also started in the area. These new 'recruits' were also once responsible for breaking the jaw of one of our caretakers who expressed his reservations about their activities.

Although the police filed a complaint about the incident, they remained unwilling to talk about radicalisation. This forced me to speak my mind assertively:

'Look here, I know this may not be in your domain, but how can you ignore these incidents? Even Muslims are scared of these radicals who are distorting the whole image of Islam and intoxicating young minds. We, as law abiding citizens, have made several complaints and want order to be maintained because if it gets out of hand, it could be deadly. God forbid a 9/11-like incident taking place in London; it would ruin community relationships and put the lives of Muslims at risk.' My assertive tone helped my cause this time.

The officer also changed his tone this time. 'Okay, come tomorrow and we will assign you a police officer who will record your complete statement.'

I was happy that finally my efforts and pleas received some attention.

I had been sitting in Kennington Police Station for three hours now and was listening to the loud and laborious tap-tapping by the officer who was registering my complaint on a computer. He told me that the audio recorder in that room was out of order, and he thus had to type my statement. This was a shock for me as Kennington was a new station. But I must confess he was far from being a typist. He was struggling to chase every letter on the keyboard, typing extremely slowly.

When he had finally written half of my complaint, he looked at

me and said, 'Toaha, let's take a break and then we can continue with your story.' It sounded as if he was mocking my statement. 'Or rather come tomorrow morning as my fingers have frozen typing your statement, and we can carry on from where we left off.'

My patience had run out. It felt like the situation was not being fully understood and was not being given due consideration.

'I don't have any stories to tell you tomorrow,' I replied angrily before the police station with my 'story' incomplete. Thus, the Centre's complaint was not registered due to the lukewarm attitude of the official towards the issue. I narrated this whole event to the other trustees who were also concerned about the lack of interest by the police. I must emphasise that the above situation may be just our bad luck that we did not get competent people to deal with the above matter, as I have on other occasions dealt with many excellent and efficient police officers. Hence the above case must not be seen as a lack of professionalism of the whole institution.

The conspiracy to take over the centre had also gained pace. The radicals had scared off some of the local Muslims who now preferred to pray in their houses or go to another mosque rather than risk their lives by coming to the centre. Many new radicals from the Finsbury Park Mosque started coming to the Centre, which was a bad omen for us.

Then, one day, I received an ultimatum from Osman B. Hussein (involved in the 21 July 2005 London Bombing). He threatened the trustees, and particularly me, warning us to get out of his way or else we would face the same fate as the *Infidels*. Upon reporting this threat, we were provided with security surveillance and an alarm system by Scotland Yard to use in case of a potential future threat. Pressing the button would direct the police to our centre immediately. One day, Osman scared the living daylight out of my son, Umar, who was only eleven at that time, by threatening to chop off his head if I continued to stand in the way of his radical and violent ambitions. That is when my family and I were advised by Scotland Yard to leave Stockwell until things improved. According to Scotland Yard, '*their hands were tied*' and they couldn't arrest anybody until and unless the person committed a crime. It was then that I had to leave Stockwell for the time being to protect my family for that reason, we moved to

another area for one year while looking after the Centre remotely.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2003, the trustees decided to write a letter to the Metropolitan Police.

The letter summarised the previous year's activities at the Centre which included the rising radicalisation, preaching of hate-filled content, motivation for violence, and intoxication of young minds, among others. We also mentioned the names of all those involved in radical activities and incidents at the Centre. We wanted to be sure that we were taking every measure against this growing nuisance. Unfortunately, a senior police officer accused the trustees of being 'scaremongers' which did not help build our confidence. Rather, it reduced our trust in certain segments of the Police. Nevertheless, we continued to challenge the violent extremists. Since there was no action from the police, I thought it prudent to devise a community-led partnership to create awareness among statutory bodies. Thus, we started designing various counter radicalisation programmes for the youth, and training sessions for selected statutory bodies that could be implemented in London.

There was a deafening silence from the police for the next two years until London experienced its own devastating bombings on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005 and again on 21<sup>st</sup> July 2005 with a second series of failed suicide attacks.

The British Prime Minister had to call an emergency COBRA meeting. 'This is a terrible and tragic atrocity that has cost many innocent lives,' stated Tony Blair after the first attacks.

Strange rumours started coming out with reference to Sir Ian Blair, head of the Metropolitan Police, and his conversation with Prime Minister Tony Blair where it was pointed out that a chemical bomb may have been used during this attack.

Previously, Sir Ian Blair had told the BBC that his force was '*the envy of the policing world in relation to counter-terrorism*'. Shortly after that statement, the first of the bombs went off. Charles Clarke, the British Home Secretary, was also angry about the incident and told Sir Ian Blair, 'Ian, find the f\*\*\*\*s.'

It was the first time since World War II that the UK had been gripped by such an air of devastation and terror as it now faced its own equivalent of the US 9/11.

For some reason, it was a shock and surprise to the Metropolitan Police that fifteen suspects (Osman B Hussein, Yeshshiemebet Girma, Sherif, etc.) whom we had mentioned in our complaint letter, were involved in the London bombings on 21 July 2005.

There were around forty police raids in Lambeth. In particular, the raid of the Blair house in Stockwell was remarkably close to the Centre, a mere three minutes' walk, where Osman B Hussein and his accomplices were hiding.

Osman Hussein's wife, Yeshshiemebet Girma, was the second person (and first woman) charged under the Terrorism Act, along with her sister, Muluemebet Girma, and was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment for her knowledge about the bomb and for abetting her husband's escape to Rome, Italy.

Osman fled initially to Brighton with his wife but then headed back to London, equipped with his brother's passport. Due to the facial similarity between the brothers, Osman was able to board a Eurostar train to Paris and from there he travelled to Milan and then Bologna, with his final stop being Rome, where he was arrested and later extradited back to Britain. Sherif had also made numerous phone calls to Italy to arrange a safe house for his brother in Rome. He was sentenced to ten years imprisonment. Years later, the London Probation Service approached me for his rehabilitation which I turned down after a comprehensive risk analysis.

This was the beginning of a new era for me and my struggle to achieve counter radicalisation. I knew that much water had passed under the bridge, yet it was not too late to reverse the radicalisation process that had infested the many young innocent minds of British Muslims.

I was later approached by the then Home Office Minister, Hazel Blears, MP, who apologised for the lack of real support by the police.

'Community intelligence and support is fundamental to counter extremism,' she emphasised. Prior to that, Sir Paul Stevenson, Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police regretted and apologised for not taking serious note of the written warnings given by the community well in advance of the 21/7 incidents.

'This is unacceptable,' he added.

I was then asked to give a lecture at Bramshill Police Training



College (a Grade one listed Jacobean mansion which has been closed now) for senior police officers and staff, and Greater Manchester Police Academy on the importance of community-led counter radicalisation initiatives. Then I was asked to train eighty police officers in the London Borough of Lambeth about cultural awareness.

As the local authority was actively involved in devising counter radicalisation programmes in partnership with us, they stayed on top of the game and stayed more engaged.

# My Pursuit for Community Development, Counter Radicalisation, Education and Rehabilitation



*It is better to light a candle than  
curse the darkness*



John F Kennedy  
and Eleanor Roosevelt

*“SOEL also initiated and successfully completed the linking of British universities (such as Staffordshire University, Middlesex University, Glasgow University, Caledonia University) with Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU) Multan, Pakistan. This partnership enabled tens of students to complete their PhDs at British universities to enhance the academic level in Pakistan and enable strategic connections between the higher education sectors of the two countries. Following their interaction, a conference was held in London titled ‘The Role of Education in Addressing Extremism’ in 2009, where the Vice Chancellor of BZU and senior academics from nine British universities participated. Then, in 2010, an international conference titled, ‘Extremism, Education and Rehabilitation’ was held at BZU where academics and practitioners from the UK and Germany participated.”*



**A**lthough many British institutions were not taking enough measures at the time to focus on the issue of radicalisation, it would be unfair to lay all the blame at the doorstep of the Government. In fact, it was equally the responsibility of people like me who were looking after Islamic centres and mosques to help disenfranchised and vulnerable youngsters isolated from the mainstream of society. On the one hand, Government institutions failed to reach out to the Muslim communities, and on the other hand, the same Muslim communities were in a mode of self-imposed social exclusion, living in ghettos with no diverse community. In certain areas, when the BME communities moved in, the indigenous white populations moved out, thus aggravating the problem of ghettoisation. I started devoting much of my time and energy to motivate and inspire the communities to work with the community at large and the local authority. I had several meetings with the local authority and police in Lambeth to reach out the Muslim community in a meaningful way. This approach helped the statutory bodies gain a better understanding of the nature and the scale of the problem; it helped us to devise adequate and effective community development solutions in partnership with the statutory bodies. This paved the way for the creation of the community led voluntary organisation, Stockwell Green Community Services (SGCS), a think-tank Forum for International Relations Development (FIRD) and an academic institution, the London College for Business Management, and Information Technology (LCBMIT), now known as the School of Economics and Law (SOEL). The primary idea behind establishing SGCS as a parent body, and FIRD and LCBMIT as its offshoots, was to illustrate the need for credible and reliable grassroots, a Muslim-led organisation as a basis for engaging with issues of social exclusion and violent extremism through education. Our work towards countering radicalisation and community cohesion started in 1999, years before the tragic 7/7 London suicide bombing in 2005. Through these initiatives, I aimed at promoting local partnerships and community involvement with Stockwell Green Community Services (SGCS) as the conduit to start preventative and diversionary programmes.

## **Inception of a non-governmental voluntary organisation: SGCS**

One of the major misconceptions in Western society is that mosques play a negative role and are the main contributors towards radicalisation. This was, and still is, a sweeping and incorrect generalisation in society. My own observations and involvement in a number of Islamic centres, especially the one I was leading, were playing a positive role in countering radicalisation and promoting a genuine and moderate narrative among young Muslims. We started several preventative and diversionary programmes under the banner of Stockwell Green Youth Project (SGYP), designed to prevent, protect, and divert youth from falling into the wrong hands as early as 1999. These projects ultimately led to the establishment of Stockwell Green Community Services (SGCS), to play an effective part in training and mentoring Muslim youth in partnership with Ash-Shahada Housing Association and keep the disenfranchised youth away from a radical path. SGCS continues to render its services to disadvantaged and socially excluded members of the community with multi-ethnic backgrounds. SGCS is well known for the unique models it designed to address problems faced by the community. These models included the Community Ownership Model and Triangular Model of Engagement and Containment, which were created in 2001, long before the UK started noticing radicalisation and extremism. SGCS took a leading role in partnership with Ash-Shahada Housing Association in developing the capacity of staff in local authorities and the Police.

Over the years, it has been involved in a number of groundbreaking counter radicalisation projects which included: HELP (Holidays and Educational Learning Programme), designed to support disadvantaged students with their exams; SPARC (Sports Project to Aid Reduction of Crime) which was motivated by the aim of diverting youth from street and gang crime through various sports activities; SEED (Support for Employability Enhancement and Development) and PROSEED (Providing Real Opportunities for the Support for Employability Enhancement and Development) to

address economic disadvantage and radicalisation; RIRP (Reducing Influences that Radicalise Prisoners) and TPVR (Towards Preventing Violent Radicalisation); PALM (Preventative and Lasting Measures); TRIM (Transforming Radicals into Models); and in addition the creation of LCBMIT/SOEL and FIRD. Among these projects, SEED, PROSEED, PALM, RIRP and TPVR really stood out. The SEED and PROSEED projects were the first funded by the European Regional Development fund, aimed at addressing economic disadvantage and radicalisation among Muslims by giving them employability skills to successfully face social challenges. We dealt with the causes of disenfranchisement in communities including British foreign policy, discrimination, and racism. These projects also aimed to encourage responsibility within the community.

Through the various arms of SGCS, we organised a series of national and international conferences on topical issues to share best practices. This included 'The Role of Mosques in the Development of Local Community (April 2000, London), 'The Role of Religions in Diminishing Terrorism (2002, London), Self-Aware Youth (2003 and 2004, London) 'Solidarity Conference' (2005, London), Dialogue Among Civilisations (2006, Pakistan), 'Tackling Hate Crime in Europe Communities: Strength in Unity' (in partnership with the National Probation Service, London (2007, London), 'The Role of Communities in Addressing Extremism' (2007, London), 'The Role of Education in Addressing Extremism' (2009, London), 'Radicalisation in Prison and Probation' (Segovia, 2010), 'Extremism, Education and Rehabilitation' (2010, Pakistan), 'European Transnational Conference: Towards Preventing Violent Radicalisation' (Berlin, 2010), among many other conferences. As Pakistan was being brutally hit by the terrorists, we held two conferences on 'The Future of Pakistan' (2012, London) and 'Pakistan: Opportunity in Crises' (in collaboration with the University of Oxford –2014, Oxford). One of the aims of SGCS was to achieve a level of sustainability, rather than relying on funding from various sources. SGCS finally reached its self-sustaining capacity in 2009; it generated funds through not-for-profit commercial activities in education and then used the revenue in philanthropic and community development projects. We managed to train around 500

officers of the police, prisons, National Offenders Management Service, and local authorities.

I take pride in saying that due to the immense and impressive work undertaken, SGCS was commissioned by the Home Office to replicate its models and projects in other areas of London and South Yorkshire. Since I was experiencing various health-related issues, I appointed a Project Director to oversee the execution of this commission while I remained the Chief Executive of the organisation.

Although the trustees of the Centre had reported Osman B Hussein and his group to the statutory bodies for trying to take over our Centre, the failure of sections of the police in being proactive resulted in a wider network being missed. Nevertheless, there was a second tier of this group whose members were arrested, and later imprisoned. While they were in prison, I was approached by the Extremism Unit at the London Probation Trust to help with the rehabilitation of two members of that group. Upon their release on parole, certain conditions were attached to their bail orders. An 18-month rehabilitation programme was designed to suit their needs. The individuals went through rigorous religious and social mentoring, educational and employability enhancement training, volunteering, etc. We also provided them with a 'Safe Space Platform' to have open and frank politically charged discussions on different issues, such as the Palestinian saga, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, Jihad, suicide bombing, etc. This was provided for a multitude of reasons, including enabling the individuals to vent their anger. For us, as a community and an organisation, it was also important to:

- 1) Understand their mindset.
- 2) Encourage them to raise these issues on political platforms.
- 3) Empower them to participate in change processes through the existing political order.

The religious mentoring was undertaken by learned scholars. On several occasions, we invited people from the Home Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, House of Commons, House of Lords, Police, and local authority, etc. to help develop their understanding and gain insight. The SEED programme was successfully executed,

thus leading the young people into either employment or enterprise.

One of the other highlights of SGCS was organising the Clapham and Stockwell Faith Forum and **Stockwell Peace Tent**. This initiative was set up by my dear friend, Catriona Robertson, a devout Christian, in association with David Hart, Chairman of the Lambeth Jewish Forum, and myself. This very local interfaith platform had an international vision and was one of the most appreciated initiatives in which I, as Vice- Chairman and then Chairman, was involved. The management committee of the Peace event included experts from Muslim, Jewish, Anglican, Methodist, Baha'i, and Hindu faiths as well as Atheists. In collaboration with the Faith Forum, I organised events which were open for everyone, from a punk to a mullah and policeman to priest, all sitting together in the same tent. The tent was also a resting place for all the visitors and participants who also used it to eat and freshen up.

One of the significant achievements of this Faith Forum was a joint statement by representatives of all the faiths after the 7/7 London bombings - that all faiths denounced violence, and that such horrific events would not damage the interfaith harmony and unity in the community. Members of this Forum, from all faiths, led by Catriona, stood in front of our Centre after the 7/7 bombings to protect it from any possible attack and retaliation from Right Wing mobs. This, for us, was something unseen or unheard of.

## **Stepping into the academic arena: LCBMIT/SOEL**

Having developed expertise in education and employability enhancement, SGCS extended its support to transform one of its privately funded educational projects into a separate legal entity called the London College of Business Management and Information Technology (LCBMIT), **now known as the School of Economics and Law (SOEL)** SOEL operates on a social welfare ethos to provide affordable education to students from all backgrounds, but in particular those from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds



in the UK. These services were extended to people from developing countries. SOEL provided extraordinary financial support through over 1500 scholarships offered to students, entirely through retained profits. SOEL preserves its community ethos inherited through SGCS and works with local community organisations, universities, and governments on a national and international level. It builds on the expertise SGCS has developed in enhancing the skills and employability of disadvantaged people in communities through a range of personal development sessions and accredited vocational courses.

SOEL also gives sustainability to SGCS by ensuring that it can continue to support community development work. Through various partners, SOEL is also offering scholarships to four provinces of Pakistan for deserving students.

One of the major achievements of SOEL included its involvement in MOSAIC, a charity founded by HRH Prince Charles, in delivering a voluntary capacity-building programme for young students through mentoring.

Another project that was supported and appreciated by the EU was Reducing Influences that Radicalise Prisoners (**RIRP**) and Towards Preventing Violent Radicals (**TPVR**). We aimed to develop a pilot community-based programme in the UK with London Probation Trust and Stockwell Green Community Services to support more effective supervision of radicalised Muslim offenders. This EU funded project also addressed the training and awareness-raising needs of Criminal Justice staff working in prisons and in the community with prisoners and ex-prisoners released on license. It was aimed at creating awareness of the factors or influences towards violent radicalisation. It also created awareness on the features of prison life and community supervision of an offender during probation under a license. The project had training programmes for the members of staff who worked with prisoners, prisoners on parole and those on supervision. The training programme and materials were designed from an international standpoint to understand how transferable such training might be across a number of European criminal justice systems. The project brought together the expertise of an established and respected NGO in Germany, the Violence

Prevention Network (VPN) that dealt with Far-Right Extremists. The project also included the Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias (SGIP), Spain, which dealt with prisoners including violent extremists. In the UK, SGCS and SOEL with the British Ministry of Justice, through the London Probation Service and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), successfully delivered these expert courses. The project developed a unique 'through the gate' high quality training package that could be used by staff working with prisoners or those released on parole. The college offered resettlement routes into education and employment for those already caught up in or were in danger of becoming violent radicals. SOEL began offering accredited courses by recognised awarding bodies in the UK, such as the Association of Business Executives (ABE), Pearson, Edexcel, City and Guilds, Awards for Training and Higher Education (ATHE), etc. These courses resulted in the creation of partnerships with British universities including Staffordshire University and Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), where our students progressed to undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

SOEL had gained significant expertise in the higher education sector and began developing courses such as the Postgraduate Diploma in International Commercial Law leading to a master's in law through our advanced standing agreement with Buckinghamshire New University (BNU). There is further advancement with BNU on a Management (Social Enterprise) programme leading to an MBA.

SOEL also initiated and successfully completed the linking of British universities (such as Staffordshire University, Middlesex University, Glasgow University, Caledonia University) with Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU) Multan, Pakistan. This partnership enabled tens of students to complete their PhDs at British universities to enhance the academic level in Pakistan and enhance strategic connections between the higher education sectors of the two countries. Following their interaction, a conference was held in London titled 'The Role of Education in Addressing Extremism' in 2009, where the Vice Chancellor of BZU and senior academics from nine British universities participated. Then, in 2010, an international conference titled, 'Extremism, Education and Rehabilitation' was

held at BZU where academics and practitioners from the UK and Germany participated.

Recently, SOEL has been instrumental in opening the door to the UK higher education sector for the first law university in Pakistan, Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto University of Law (SZABUL), Karachi. During my visit to Karachi, I signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Vice Chancellor of SZABUL at the Governor's House which was attended by the Governor himself and the chairman of Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC). This MoU was to offer scholarships and training to their students and staff to study and achieve British qualifications. I can proudly say that SZABUL's six members of staff have completed the Postgraduate qualification in law with us. Following our three-year partnership, I organised a meeting with the vice chancellors of SZABUL and BNU to facilitate critical dialogue between them. In addition, I linked up SZABUL with the British Deputy High Commission and UK Trade and Investment in Karachi so that they could forge relationships with the British higher education sector. Foreign students have contributed more than £7 billion to the UK economy and non-EU students made up around 13% of the UK student population in years 2012–13, an increase of 10% from five years earlier.

It has long been my belief that education plays a vital role in countering radicalisation and violent extremism, particularly in under-developed countries. I have always considered that it is important to hear all sides of the debate to initiate change. Therefore, through my links with Islamic seminaries and the higher education sector, I decided that it was important to link the British High Commission with Islamic seminaries/scholars to bridge the gap in understanding of all sides. There is no doubt that some devious elements of society were hiding behind the banner of Islam and abusing religion to achieve their goals – specifically, political interests. At the same time, it was necessary for the High Commission to listen to the genuine concerns raised by the leadership, such as most Muslims being held responsible for the actions of a twisted minority.

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## From Local to Global: FIRD

The Forum for International Relations Development (FIRD) is a UK-based independent, not-for-profit, non-governmental research and advocacy think-tank established in 2006. The Forum was the initiative of leading British, European, and international practitioners, scholars, researchers, community lobbyists, humanitarians, and journalists to provide a common platform for sharing ideas, opinions and research results contributing to finding political solutions to global issues. FIRD conducts wide-ranging analysis of political, social, and religious conflicts that have a bearing on international security. The think-tank works in collaboration with various British, European, and international statutory and voluntary bodies.

Most recently, FIRD held two international conferences on Pakistan, which is also the largest recipient of foreign aid from the UK. British bilateral trade with Pakistan has been increasing consistently and the ties between the two countries have been strengthened through a close working relationship. The first was a two-day international conference titled *The Future of Pakistan* which was held in 2012 and inaugurated at Portcullis House, House of Commons. This conference attracted international experts and speakers including Professor Stephen Cohen, Professor Anatol Lieven, Professor Robin Brooke-Smith, Dr. Farooq Sattar (Minister for Overseas Pakistanis), General (R) Syed Ather Ali (Former Defence Secretary of Pakistan), Bishop Alexander Malik (Bishop Emeritus of Lahore), Rt. Hon. Sadiq Khan MP (Shadow Lord Chancellor & Justice Secretary), Lord Qurban Hussain and many more who came together to discuss solutions for Pakistan, rather than the problems, as many conferences do.

The objectives of the conference were: to create the 'Change Maker' scholarship fund for students in Pakistan; to develop a proposal for a 'London Probation' style service to rehabilitate violent extremists in Pakistan; to facilitate dialogue between the Islamic seminary leadership and the Western establishment to create a better understanding; to share the British minority perspective and arrange seminars on capacity and confidence building with Pakistani

minorities. The conference resolved those lessons learnt from the UK should be adapted in Pakistan for the above. As a bonus, the Minister for Overseas of Pakistanis, Pakistan also announced his bill for giving overseas Pakistanis the right to vote at the inauguration of the conference.

In a follow up, the second in the series was titled *Pakistan: Opportunity in Crisis*. It was held in collaboration with St Antony's College, University of Oxford, Centre for Research and Security Studies and the Knowledge Forum. Over 27 speakers, from Pakistan, Germany, US, and the UK, addressed the two-day conference.

I also spoke on the topic of: *Countering Radicalisation in Pakistan; Sharing the British Experience*.

Dr. Qazi Khalid Ali, founding Vice Chancellor of Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto University of Law (SZABUL) came to see me while I was staying at the Chief Minister Baluchistan's house in Karachi. It is dubbed 'Baluchistan House'. It was the first time in Baluchistan's history that a non-tribal leader, Dr Abdul Malik Baloch of the National Party (a social democratic, centre-left political party of Pakistan) had become the Chief Minister (CM) of Baluchistan. Dr Qazi had been discussing various plans which he had developed for promoting the Change Maker Scholarship programme throughout the Sindh province.

There was a gentle knock at the door; the CM walked in with a jubilant mood to ask whether his team had been looking after me properly. Asking him to join us, I introduced the Vice Chancellor, and our discussions began anew. I asked him what I could do for the Baloch people to address deprivation and disenfranchisement among Baloch youth, particularly in playing a facilitative role in development especially since radicalisation is on the rise in Baluchistan.

'I always hear at various platforms that small provinces of Pakistan such as Baluchistan and Sindh complain that it is the Punjab province that reaps the benefits of resources. I also hear that Pakistan receives aid for various projects from foreign government agencies, such as DfID UK and USAID, but that the Punjab takes up most of it. So, what might I offer you to support your developmental agenda?'

He replied, 'Mr. Qureshi, I understand that you have a good friend in the person of HE Mr. John Tucknott MBE, British Deputy High Commissioner in Karachi, who is overseeing British interests for Sindh and Baluchistan. He is the head of UK Trade and Investment in Pakistan and is also a fellow MBE like you. Could you arrange a meeting with him and our party leader to have a dialogue for some strategic development projects in Baluchistan? Also, we would like to benefit from your 'Change Maker Scholarship Programme' for our deserving students to study in the UK.'

'The scholarship programme is indeed a blessing for our students and I support that idea. It will raise the education level of our nation and create strategic links between the higher education sector of both our countries,' Dr Qazi said.

I spoke to the College Board in the UK and signed an MoU with the Chief Minister to offer scholarships worth £98,000 to Baloch students to study post-graduate programmes at our academic institution in the UK.

On 24 April 2014, I had a meeting with Mr. John Tucknott MBE, British Deputy High Commissioner in Karachi, and Mir Hasil Khan Bizenjo, a prominent Pakistani politician, and President of the National Party. He has been an elected member of the Senate of Pakistan since 2009 and a former member of the National Assembly of Pakistan. Also in attendance was Dr Ishaque Baloch (Vice President of the party), Dr Kaiser Bengali, the then Adviser to the Government of Baluchistan and Akram Kaimkhani, an old friend and comrade, were also present. Another meeting, with Mr. Philip Barton, the British High Commissioner in Islamabad, and the CM Dr Abdul Malik Baloch also took place to strengthen strategic ties.

## **Minorities in Pakistan - A dialogue at FIRD**

Certain incidents had taken place that did not bode well for our work on interreligious and interfaith harmony; therefore, there was a great need to bridge the social, religious, and civil gaps to bring the

people closer to one another and to understand religious differences. At regular intervals, I organised many seminars with Islamic scholars and Christian Bishops for the promotion of inter-religious, intra-religious and inter-cultural dialogue in Pakistan and to promote interfaith harmony in society. I arranged the concluding session of 'Minorities in Pakistan' Seminar' series, where the speakers agreed that interfaith dialogue was essential to bring peace and stability in a world which was increasingly seeing more wars.

Calling for joint efforts for promotion of interfaith consonance and harmony among people having different beliefs and religions, the Chairman of Ulema Council Pakistan, Hafiz Allama Tahir Ashrafi, vowed to start joint efforts for peace and brotherhood between peoples from different religions and faiths. He urged the world community to denounce the blasphemous acts of derailed individuals who were setting the entire world on fire. 'We are shamed by the acts of those Muslims who participated in the violent protests in Pakistan and looted, plundered and destroyed public property in Pakistan as it is in blatant violation of the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH),' Ashrafi asserted.

Maulana Ashrafi was one of those Islamic leaders in Pakistan with whom I was in constant contact during the Rimsha Masih case. Rimsha was an under-age Christian girl detained in August by police under a blasphemy law which has been occasionally misused not only against Christian minorities but also against Muslims. She was accused of burning pages of the Muslim holy book, the Quran. Young Rimsha, believed to be mentally impaired, was later released on bail.

'We will encourage the study and replication of programmes for inter-religious fraternity and harmonise the society for peace, love, and tolerance, which is the true essence of all faiths. I laud the efforts and steps taken by FIRD in supporting diaspora and the Pakistani community in combating extremism through strengthening institutions for interfaith harmony,' Ashrafi continued.

He further said that a Christian who believed in the Bible would never bring disrespect to the Holy Prophet (PBUH), and the people who practised wrong things worked on political agendas. He also shared that though anti-blasphemy laws had typically been used against religious minorities, the police were applying the same rules

to charge nine Muslims, including a cleric, of rampaging through a temple and destroying Hindu religious items.

'I think this is a watershed gesture from Pakistan, and a good gesture of Muslim people from Pakistan,' Ashrafi said, while welcoming the decision.

I emphasised that inter-religious and inter-culture dialogues were the need of the hour. I stressed that we needed to create awareness by holding seminars and meetings on interfaith dialogue to bring people of different beliefs closer to one another. Drawing on my own experiences in Bradford, my advice was to draw minorities in the mainstream of society, saying they had been playing a vital role in the development of Pakistan. I said that there was a need for promoting interfaith dialogue and every society was a product of strong interaction between diverse cultures and faiths. It was a fact that all the religions of the world fundamentally preach tolerance, peace, and equality; nonetheless, the warmongers exploited religion to fulfil their heinous desires. The world today was confronted by enormous challenges of poverty, illiteracy, deprivation and hunger, and Pakistan was yet to overcome these problems. The country was badly hit by extremism and terrorism, which had caused serious fissures within society. I pointed out that dialogue was the only way forward to defuse the current hostile situation. I urged the government and leading scholars that the Blasphemy Law in Pakistan should be extended and re-examined so that it is applied against those who desecrate worship places such as cathedrals or speak against the Prophet Jesus (PBUH) to ensure the fairness of the law. It should also have a clause that is used against the wrong accusers. I requested attendees to observe a moment of silence in honour of the deceased who had been victims of the abuse of religion, particularly in the light of the death of the US Ambassador and his staff in Libya.

I concluded by stressing about the continuation of sharing the ideas for harmonising society and inculcating peaceful co-existence in the United Kingdom and Pakistan. Sharing information to cooperate further for inter-religious inter-active planning was agreed. It was also agreed to arrange an exchange of delegations to learn from each other's experiences and share best practices for creating a tolerant and congenial society.



## An interaction with HRH Prince Charles

On 3 June 2014, I met with the Prince of Wales at Buckingham Palace during the Queen's Garden Party. Although there was a long spell of rain, the royal family still made their way out to meet their guests.

The conversation was a joy as Prince Charles lightened up the atmosphere with witty banter mixed with serious discussions. As the discussions went on, we touched on Pakistan's former High Commissioners to the UK and various cities. Prince Charles congratulated me on the publication of my recent book '*Mera Jihad - Chak 444 Say Buckingham Palace Tak*', the Urdu version of my book '*My Journey*'. He further inquired about my village in Pakistan and discussed the simplicity of life in Pakistan.

The Prince expressed his desire 'to visit Pakistan once more' as he has only had the 'privilege' to visit the country on one occasion. As the Founder of the charity *Mosaic*, he was delighted to learn that my academic institution, as the lead for the South East Region, had been working with the Harris Academy to mentor students from diverse backgrounds to enhance employability, confidence, and self-efficacy.



## Mentoring Work with MOSAIC, a charity founded by HRH Prince Charles

While carrying on with my support for charitable work in the UK, I joined hands with the Mosaic charity for ensuring affordable education and capacity building for young British people. Founded by the Prince of Wales in 2007, Mosaic's mentoring programmes creates opportunities for young people growing up in our most deprived communities. I, through SOEL, was invited to contribute to this noble cause of Mosaic as part of a leadership role to inspire

young people to realise their hidden talents and unlock their potential. With the help of successful business people who were volunteer mentors acting as role models, we try to bridge the aspirations-attainment gap. Overall, this commendable work makes a real impact. In my view, this inspirational and innovative programme needs to be considered for rolling out to countries like Pakistan. I offered Internships/Apprenticeships for young people who were referred to us by Mosaic. Additionally, we also offered Scholarships worth £2,000 per student per year, for the A-level equivalent and above, and for undergraduate courses. We are fully engaged with schools in the London Boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark, and the Sutton Harris Academy.

My sons, Saad and Umar, are also involved as mentors in the Mosaic mentoring programme. This programme has so far included three separate blocks of a five-month mentoring of Year 11 students to lift their aspirations and confidence. This Mosaic experience gave me hope that such organisations present in the UK are playing an active part in nurturing future generations of the country. My next project is to lobby Mosaic to launch such a project in Pakistan.



# My Encounter at 10 Downing Street

20th October 2008

“

*Be a pro at what you do. No one  
shows up to meetings of the  
Unsuccessful Skydivers Club.*

”

Ryan Lilly

*I repeated my question.*

*“My question is simple, when all of them go back into society, is there any concrete mechanism in place for the rehabilitation of these people now labelled ‘home grown’ terrorists? Hundreds of suspects under the Terrorism Act have been arrested. I am sure many of them are going to walk free due to insufficient evidence against them, some were probably arrested wrongly; and some will eventually be sentenced. There will also be those who are arrested in cases of mistaken identity. After their release, how will you ensure that they become an effective part of British society and reset their lives, rather than becoming hardened criminals and going down the track that they were accused of?”*



Prime Minister Gordon Brown looked at me with seriousness and a still posture as I posed this question to the group. We had gathered with Reverend Nims Obunge at number 10, Downing Street. The meeting was organised to discuss issues relating to *Crime and Disorder*.

‘I think Toaha has a point,’ Prime Minister Gordon Brown said as he looked at Sir Ian Blair, Police Commissioner, who took off his glasses, his eyes glazed as if he was in a phase of deep thinking.

My question followed Sir Ian’s answers. He seemed uncomfortable with my line of follow up and was finding it hard to come up with a plausible explanation to my query. He was a man with an enormous amount of respect and known as the *thinking policeman*. He had been knighted by the Queen in 2003 for his services but soon after the London bombings of 7 and 21 July 2005, he had come under scathing criticism for some clumsy comments that made him cautious afterwards.

‘Mr. Prime Minister’, he said while rubbing his right cheek. ‘There is no straight answer to Mr. Qureshi’s question. Having said that, we do have experience of dealing with IRA terrorists. The Probation Services will deal with the people who are released from prisons, although they deal with all kinds of convicts. Would the same approach work for these religiously motivated terrorists? This might get complicated; we currently don’t have any rehabilitation programme for these terrorists who are willing to give their lives due to some twisted beliefs. The London Probation Trust is our only option to deal with suspects of recent ideologically motivated terrorist attacks, but they would treat them normally as other terrorists. What would you say, Mr. Qureshi?’

This time around, the PM looked towards me with inquisitive eyes.

‘Thank you, Sir Ian. The only reason I want to turn your attention towards this is that even though British security agencies have an impeccable record of dealing with organisations like the IRA and its affiliates, religious extremism of this nature is something new. I am not an expert in criminology and so I won’t be able to give you technical advice. But we can’t deal with these radicals like criminals or extremists in the West. You can legislate and make arrangements

for criminals involved in other crimes but what about a guy who can give his life with the thoughts of gaining rewards in an afterlife? You can't address such crimes by mere punishments. There has to be a system in place that not only rehabilitates them back into our society but also helps them to get a better understanding of the religion they purportedly use to justify their despicable acts of violence. A system which teaches them that the religion for which they were about to throw away their lives, promotes peace and harmony and not violence. Through this, we can channel their inner anger and energy for the betterment of society. We won't be specifically dealing with such people based on their religion, it would be strictly based on their conviction or alleged crime.'

The PM seemed contented with my response. 'Thank you, Toaha. That seems to make sense. Now tell me, what can you do to help us in this regard? What about other Muslim leaders?' asked PM Gordon Brown.

'Well, first and foremost, my suggestion would be to encourage and empower the Muslim community to be part of the solution rather than the problem. Back in 1999, even before the 9/11 and 7/7 incidents, we realised that elements from radical groups had started making inroads into British society. We knew that these groups were intoxicating young Muslims and so we started to work against this. Most of the youth have reservations about Britain's foreign policy – something which I have discussed with the FCO in the past. People need answers on issues like Palestine, Kashmir, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Images of destruction of these countries are shown by radical groups to young people and it motivates them to be violent.'

I took a brief pause as the PM continued to fix his attention on me.

'You may be surprised to know that we warned the authorities two years before the July bombings that radicals in the UK were gaining pace and influence and thus, we were afraid that a 9/11 style incident could take place in London as well. We have written proof of our complaint at that time. We also feared that such an incident would indirectly hurt Muslim communities in the UK, ultimately being seen as suspects and being defamed. The Imams of our Centre gave some names to the police authorities who said that they didn't

have any mechanism to tackle such activities as there was no crime committed. It wasn't a surprise to us that some individuals among the fifteen named in our complaint were involved in the July London bombings.

'I don't want to embarrass anyone here. The high-ups: including Sir Ian's Deputy, Sir Paul Stevenson, personally visited us and apologised for ignoring our concerns in the past. But I thought that in the context of this meeting it was important to shed some light on the background.'

After mentioning this, Sir Ian seemed appreciative.

'I still remember that the night, after the London bombing, our Christian and Jewish neighbours were guarding the Centre as they knew we had nothing to do with these attacks; it was an encouraging and great display of solidarity.'

The PM nodded positively as if he agreed with my opinion.

'We launched a four-year European project in Lambeth in 2003 to address radicalisation. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Middlesex University evaluated the programme and hailed it as an immense success. Throughout the length of this project, we engaged with hundreds of young Muslims and created awareness about the menace of extremism and how they could use their learning to become effective members of the British Society. We also provided them with safe places to share any reservations, dissatisfaction, disenfranchisement, etc. We empowered them to become an integral part of the country's political system. Those young people, I can safely say, cannot be intoxicated to use violence.' I again paused for a moment before carrying on.

'But during the length of our project we realised that it is not only angry young Muslims that needed this awareness, police officials, parliamentarians, members of parliament and the media, among others, had extraordinarily little knowledge about the Muslim community. This was because very rarely did the officials here know about Islam, not even the basics, and thus were dealing with the problem in a sketchy manner. Awareness about the religious and cultural aspect of Muslim communities among the statutory bodies was necessary I have even spoken at City Council to inform them that if Muslims are made a part of the solution and not the problem,



things could improve and would move in the right direction. Increase in number Peers in the House of Lords and members of the Parliament shows that Muslim community is working hard to integrate in the mainstream British society. With similar ideas in mind, I led a delegation in 2006 to Pakistan that had officials from the London Metropolitan Police, the media, and the Probation Service. We had several meetings in Pakistan and participated in a conference titled **Dialogue among Civilisations** in Multan. My British friends in the delegation called the visit an eye opener as they learnt many new things.

‘I would like you to establish proper rehabilitation mechanisms for the convicted terrorists who have been arrested under the Terrorism Act and will serve out their sentences. By doing so, you will be making Muslims part of the solution which could help in the whole process. Further, I would suggest establishing mechanisms where police officials are given basic awareness on Islam, so that the whole scheme could lead to an effective strategy implementation.’

Sir Ian Blair replied, ‘I need to meet with the head of the London Probation Trust, Sir David Scott, and the Attorney General, Baroness Patricia Scotland, to discuss this further.’

In the coming weeks, important meetings were held with London Probation and subsequently a conference was organised where Baroness Scotland, Sir David Scott, and I spoke on this topic in the London Assembly.

It was after a few months that I was requested to arrange awareness sessions for three hundred public servants where they could be given basic training on Islam, Muslim traditions, background, and conditions for Jihad, along with other prominent issues. As I started to plan the session with the relevant departments, it was suggested that I lead the sessions myself.



The Muslim community in Britain had been facing Islamophobia for quite some time now because of the London bombings. Far right extremism was also on the rise post 9/11. However, the intensity of this spiral was not as vicious in the United Kingdom as compared to the United States. This could partly be attributed to British history as well as the challenging work on community relations by the civic society. Consecutive British governments in the past had enjoyed fruitful ties with Muslims, some of whom also fought alongside them during the World Wars. Furthermore, Britain had more exposure to Muslims than the United States as it had been influenced by multiculturalism since the 1970's. One more factor that added to the whole situation was the presence of Muslim members in the legislature who were always there to wisely advise the government. These factors restrained the British Government from initiating knee jerk reactions. Nonetheless, Muslims have been subject to hatred by far-right extremists in Britain; the July suicide bombing fuelled the situation, and these far-right extremists finally got the excuse they had long been searching for against the Muslim community. Religious hate crimes against Muslims had risen six-fold in London since the 7/7 bombings. There were 269 religious recorded hate crimes in the three weeks after 7 July, compared with 40 in the same period the previous year. But contrary to these figures, the situation in our Stockwell community was totally the opposite. Religious hate was receding mostly due to our interfaith harmony efforts in partnership with my friends, especially Catriona Robertson and David Hart, my colleagues, and people from various faith groups.

After the failed suicide bombings of 21<sup>st</sup> July 2005, and the 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2005 'mistaken identity' killing of an innocent Brazilian, Jean Charles de Menezes, at the Stockwell tube station, not far from the Centre, we became a focus of attention for the media as some of the bombers were linked to the Centre. De Menezes was killed when he was shot eight times due to his 'resemblance' with Osman B. Hussein, a bombing suspect whom the Centre had reported to the authorities on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2003; nevertheless, no action was taken against him. This increased the misery of the authorities who could not afford such a mishap at that time. The story of this connection spread like wildfire which made media outlets camp outside the

centre asking for interviews and comments, thinking that this would be another Finsbury Park Mosque. Thankfully though, our official complaint back in 2003 to the authorities saved the day for us, as without such evidence, no one would have believed our version of the story.

I had travelled to Birmingham to discuss the issues that had been facing us, with senior members of the Muslim community from across the UK. At the same time, as co-founder of the Clapham and Stockwell Faith Forum and a trustee of the Centre, I had to ensure that my local community was being looked after and that reassurances had been given to the locals that the Centre was not involved. SO13, the Counter Terrorism Command Unit at New Scotland Yard dealt with this kind of operation. Therefore, the local police could not provide the level of information the communities were looking for, and we also could not make out the true extent of what had happened. We had decided that there should be a meeting of the local community on 24 July; it was not to be just a gathering, but more of a vigil and a show of solidarity. Since I was in Birmingham, I was not sure of whether to leave things and go back. It was important that I ensured that all the leaders were on the same page and, if they were facing any problems, how to handle them. I had also given them advice on engaging with their local communities and statutory bodies.

All of us from the Centre had taken the trip to Birmingham, but I felt uneasy leaving Stockwell and I knew I had to calm things there. After speaking to the leaders in Birmingham, I rushed back to address the meeting in London. On my way back, I reflected on how things must be unfolding back in London. I spoke to some friends on about the current scenario; people were looking at the Muslim community with suspicion. My children were saying that they were being asked whether there was any link between the mosque and the Stockwell tube station shooting. I arrived at the meeting when the Borough Commander from Metropolitan Police was about to speak. I was dressed in traditional Islamic clothing and suddenly I felt the piercing eyes of many of the locals. The suspicion was certainly there – but I urged the community not to associate Islam with these terrible acts of violence, expressed my deepest sympathies and extended my

condolences to the families. A statement issued on 22 July 2005 condemning the attacks was read out at the Mosque before the Friday.

In July 2005, seeing two suicide attacks and one 'mistaken identity' shooting by the police; the media was awash with speculations. Wherever they could get some new information or some breaking news, they were there. Many outlets were hoping, although they did not expressly say so, that the Mosque was somehow involved. I still remember the depressing expression on the face of one reporter from the BBC who had insinuated our involvement and was hoping for a juicy story, after I handed over copies of the letter warning the authorities back in 2003. It was important, however, to ensure that the Mosque had cleared its name and people were aware of the work we had done since 1999.

Initially, after the attacks, I thought the Centre might be shut down, but the authorities were the ones facing the media's heat for their failure.

National and international newspapers and channels were pressing me for an interview and wanted to carry me LIVE in their news bulletins. People referred to me with phrases such as *the man who predicted the July attacks*. I went on air on channels such as CNN, ITV, BBC, etc. where I was candid in my comments as I briefed the world that the Muslim community was proactive, and we had already warned the authorities that such attacks could take place. This was something that many people were unaware of.

For these reasons, I was, and will remain, a strong advocate of the fact that mosques and Islamic Centres are not set up to promote or harbour terrorism, because if they were, then a Centre like ours would never have warned the authorities about such activities.



Not all was bright and rosy with Britain's new counter terror CONTEST strategy, which was devised after several consultations. The strategy was first developed in 2003, in the wake of 9/11, whereas revisions and the real progress on the strategy were made in 2006, after the 7/7 bombings. Further modifications were also made in 2009 and 2011. The strategy had four strands that included PREVENT, PURSUE, PROTECT and PREPARE.

Under PREVENT, several programmes were initiated by the Government, in partnership with community organisations, to counter radicalisation, and undertake de-radicalisation.

In the same process, I was invited to several meetings and seminars organised by the Home Office and police on the topics of extremism, where I was sometimes surprised by the participants' lack of knowledge about Islam and/or terrorism in the UK. They talked about home grown terrorism and how to deal with the symptoms, yet never discussed the root causes of the menace of radicalisation and terrorism. This lack of knowledge raised great concern amongst average Muslims. In some of the events where I contributed to debates, I had to speak quite often to cover areas that were missed. This effort paid off in the end because I was successful in changing a lot of minds.

In 2006, after my trip with senior officers from the Metropolitan Police and Foreign and Commonwealth Office to Pakistan, I was approached to pilot a project called Channel, A project that aimed to provide support to individuals at risk of being drawn into violent extremism. It draws on existing collaboration between local authorities, the police, statutory partners (such as the education sector, social services, children's and youth services, and offender management services) and the local community. It had three objectives: to identify individuals at risk of being drawn into violent extremism; to assess the nature and extent of that risk; to develop the most appropriate support for the individuals concerned.

In 2007, a Police-led Channel project was launched in Lambeth where the Centre was situated. The second project was launched in Lancashire. It was further expanded to six other areas in the UK. Unfortunately, it was later revealed by some project initiators of Channel that this programme was in effect implemented to spy on

the Muslim community. I attended many board meetings for this programme and discussed the concerns raised by some members of the community. Soon afterwards, the project became controversial and lost its credibility in many circles.

Then, millions of pounds were spent on ex-radicals who were supposed to help the British government in curbing radicalisation, but, that also soon died. When the Labour party lost the general election, the new Conservative-led coalition government changed their approach and cut the Prevent community project's funding significantly.



In July 2008, we were told that a high-level delegation from Pakistan wanted to meet us at our rehabilitation Centre. The delegation included the Director General of the Federal Investigation Agency, the Chief of the National Police Bureau, and the Home Secretary of Pakistan, along with senior civil servants from the British Home Office and Foreign Office.

Our rehabilitation programmes had already started. This was the main motivation for the delegation to meet with us. They wanted an insight into our rehabilitation and counter radicalisation programmes. We received them warmly and before our discussion started, I gave them a short tour of the Centre and gave them an introduction to our work. We explained how the suspects, arrested under the Terrorism Act, comprised of people from different walks of life including students, engineers, doctors, architects,

As our discussions progressed, one of the delegates from Pakistan made a generalised stereotypical statement that, *'the Mullah and madrassahs are the root cause of all these problems'*. The poor guy didn't know that the person he was talking to was working with Mullahs and managing an Islamic Centre, and was also carrying out very sophisticated counter radicalisation initiatives. Such a stereotype was not only wrong and misleading but also represented a constrained

narrative on the issue. I listened to his point patiently but inside, my annoyance was reaching its peak. It was unfathomable that even after giving the delegation a detailed presentation on radicalisation and extremism, someone could still make such a generalised remark. But, since they were my guests, I had to be polite in my answer:

‘I have to disagree with you on that. We can’t simplify this complex issue by laying all the blame on one segment of the Muslim community such as the Mullahs and Madrassahs. I don’t think this war of superpowers ends up on Mullahs or Madrassahs; it is extremely complex. As I explained in my presentation, it was not these Mullahs who were being arrested on suspicion of terrorism; they were professionals from diverse backgrounds.’

There was a tense atmosphere in the room. The team from Pakistan looked bewildered by my statement.

‘So, you mean the Mullahs are completely innocent and pure in this?’ asked one of the delegates, representing the Police Bureau.

‘Most definitely not. They are currently a part of the problem, which I can agree with, but I cannot agree with the statement that they are the (only) problem. The establishment in Pakistan, and America’s CIA, designed an ideological framework that fitted around and perverted religion; they used the Mullahs to install this narrative in the minds of the youth. Now, people are putting the blame on them. However, we need to use the same means, the same kind of people, to detangle and unwind the narrative in the youth. Make them a part of the solution, and not the problem. I’ve always said that a guy wearing a suit and tie might not be able to talk to those young people, but a bearded Mullah can.’

A heated discussion ensued. They argued that it was down to the Madrassahs and Mullahs perpetuating the violent cycle of radicalism. They were adamant that a Madrassah was the breeding ground for terrorists across the globe. I thought it would be better to give them a glimpse of the reality we faced on the ground in the UK.

‘I would like you to meet a British Muslim with Moroccan and Italian ancestry who was convicted under the Terrorism Act and has recently been released on parole to go through our eighteen months rehabilitation programme.’ The delegation’s interest peaked.

The young man, whom I referred to as Ali for security reasons,

was not only of my son, Saad's, age, but had also studied with him, Talha and Umar at one point.

He met the delegation and shed light on his life. He discussed all the preconceptions that he had as a child, along with the experiences he faced which included his parents' complex Muslim identity, lack of Halal food at his school, prejudiced treatment he experienced at school due to his religious background, and his perceptions about the lack of employment opportunities for Muslims in Britain. But even though he faced this situation, and, although people were nudging him, he never went on the path of extremism. The final straw was when, one day, he turned on the TV and saw something.

Ali relayed the day that he was pushed over the edge. 'It was a video of a twelve-year-old Palestinian child, Ahmed, whose father was begging for his life and shivering behind a wall, as Israeli soldiers aimed at the child and killed him at point blank range. He was an innocent child, killed for what? Being a Muslim was all. After watching that video, my life changed. I thought that I, or my young cousins, could also share his fate one day, just for being a Muslim. This is when my mindset began to change. I was not influenced by an Imam or Mullah; I was sitting in south London watching this sad news story that broke me.'

The delegates were taken aback after hearing Ali's story. Reality had hit them hard.

'You're right, Mr. Qureshi,' said the Foreign Office official. 'The matter is not as simple as it is sometimes perceived; it has many layers.'

'Perhaps we have been hasty in making our observations and judgements. Mr. Qureshi, but we can discuss this further and explore some of the avenues you have suggested?' the Director General, FIA, commented. 'Hearing directly from a horse's mouth has given me food for thought and maybe there is something we need to get to the bottom of,' he concluded.

One week after this meeting and having observed the work we were doing, a Home Office official, William Nye, came to see me again and requested to implement the rehabilitation programme in other parts of London, and Yorkshire.





# A Walk into the Minefield

“

*With faith, discipline and selfless devotion to duty, there is nothing worthwhile that you cannot achieve.*

”

**Muhammad Ali Jinnah**  
Islamabad May, 2011

*“The ‘50 Years No War Pact’ between Pakistan and India, which I was proposing, consisted of a yearly 1% reduction for five years in defence budgets on both sides, which comprises up to 25% of their total budgets. The money saved from this reduction would subsequently be spent on Education and Health provision and facilities. Another important point on the agenda was to request the Pakistani Premier to grant India the ‘Most Favoured Nation’ (MFN) status. For me, the hostility between the neighbours was the chief catalyst behind growing extremism on both sides. Signing this pact meant a reduction in hostility, which would possibly lead to the curbing of extremism.”*



It was a dreary, baking hot morning in Islamabad as the giant, white Pakistan International Airline (PIA) Airbus A310 touched down gently on the dry runway of Benazir Bhutto International Airport. It was the end of an eight-hour flight from London. In the cabin, the stewardess announced that it was 8.00 a.m. in Pakistan's capital city and the temperature on the ground was bordering 37° Celsius. The plane was still rolling to a halt and the steward was insisting that passengers remain seated with their seat belts fastened until the seat belt sign was turned off. However, most of the passengers had already stood up from their seats and were fumbling with their hand luggage kept in the overhead lockers. I could hear some calling others by yelling, 'Jaldi, Jaldi!' (hurry up, hurry up); a typical scene in Pakistan where people elbow past one another to get out of a queue, whether from the mosque, train, or plane.

It was sizzling outside – though a pleasant departure from the grey skies and gusts of London. The airport was generally overcrowded. As we scurried across the runway into the airport building, stern faced officials of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) fixed their piercing eyes on the faces of the travellers. There were customs officials sizing up the passengers and grimacing at the huge bags of all shapes and sizes. They would usually target the British or American Pakistani passengers.

A luxurious, chauffeur-driven limousine waited outside with a uniformed driver. He swiftly opened the passenger door and I plunged into the seat. My protocol officer rushed over to the front seat next to the driver.

The car whizzed out of the winding road from the airport to the exit gates. I could clearly see the blue uniform clad men of Islamabad Police standing guard in the bunkers. The scary nuzzles of machine guns peeped from every nook and cranny. It clearly reflected the sombreness of the situation as suicide attacks had become more common. It was all a matter of chance as to who might pull the first trigger – the bomber with the suicide vest jacket or the security forces on guard. I could recollect several reports of the body counts – three thousand men in uniform and forty thousand civilians had lost their lives in a war which was still contended for 'foreign' ownership.

It was then that the first text landed on my newly topped up

Pakistani mobile phone number. I lazily looked at the screen with no intention of making an effort. Perhaps the heat and humidity were getting to me or the rush of leaving the office to get the flight to Islamabad. I wanted instead to speak to my protocol officer about the string of meetings set up to discuss the 'No War Pact' campaign recently initiated by the Forum for International Relations Development (FIRD). He had briefed me earlier that we would be meeting some men in khaki to bring the much acclaimed 'Pakistani establishment' on board.

'We will meet chief ministers, journalists, politicians, opinion makers, but most importantly, the generals, who have more to lose than anyone else if the barbed wires are melted with India,' he stressed. 'I've ensured that the no war pact information pack, including your profile and previous work, has been received by everyone.'

Before I could respond, my mobile phone beeped again several times.

'My goodness!' The text stunned me:

*'Osama bin Laden is dead. President Obama broke the big news to the nation. His death was the result of a US operation launched in Abbottabad, (Pakistan) in a compound where bin Laden was believed to be hiding, according to US intelligence. After a brief fire fight, a small team of Navy Seals killed bin Laden and took possession of his body.'*

The message came from a journalist friend whom I planned to meet in Islamabad for the No War Pact. He was the editor of a national newspaper in Pakistan – a man with the right kind of connections in the right kind of quarters.

My face broke into a grin. It was not first of April but second of May. The joke was stale.

I scrolled down the texts. The second, third and fourth texts were all from different individuals sharing the same news, though in different words. I shook my head in disbelief.

'I have news for you that will make your trip.' I raised my voice to grab the attention of my protocol officer, who was reclining on the front seat. As I read the first text out, I noticed a trace of smile emerging at the corner of his mouth.

'... and after that, they put the video on YouTube with the title,

‘the last of Laden’ and it has already received ten million hits,’ he blurted out mockingly. Before he could finish, his mobile phone rang a couple of times.

‘Hello ....’ I saw him quickly pinning it to his ears and then I heard him muttering, ‘Yes, we are on the way to the Serena Hotel. Yes. Oh, I see. Ohhhh. God!’ And then with a deep sigh, ‘Yes, I understand.’

He turned to me, clearly annoyed and upset. ‘Your news is correct. OBL was found near the Military Academy in Abbottabad and killed by the US Navy Seals. And the whole operation has been conducted without taking Pakistan into confidence. It’s red alert in here. Our meetings are cancelled,’ his voice croaked.

Our initiative with the men in khaki ended before it had even started. OBL had screwed all of us. Again.



## **8 April, 2011 – 50 Years No War Pact between India and Pakistan**

The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani, seemed to be in a jubilant mood. He was visiting the United Kingdom in pursuit of strategic dialogue with British Prime Minister, David Cameron.

As the Chairman of FIRD, I was now in a meeting with PM Gilani, at the Sheraton Hotel, London, to discuss my ‘strategic initiative’ of a 50 Year No War Pact with India.

‘Sayeen (sir), why do you want me to get in trouble?’ he said in an amusing tone in the Seraiki language. We all burst into laughter.

However, my suggestion landed as a bomb on the table. After deflecting my suggestion with a joke and some laughter, pin drop silence enveloped the room for a few seconds. The Prime Minister and his Military Secretary gazed at me quizzically.

‘Sayeen (a sign of respect in Seraiki language of Multan), it is

nothing out of the box. If you could take some daring steps, you may carve out your name in history for taking a road less travelled. We are not inventing the wheel. It may fall new on the ears but two presidents and men in uniform, General Ayub Khan and General Zia Ul Haq have both already made this suggestion to their Indian counterparts,' I tried to soothe him in Seraiki.

The Prime Minister looked towards his Military Secretary again who nodded in affirmation. 'Yes sir. Not only that; President Ayub had proposed a 'joint defence union' of India and Pakistan.

The Prime Minister of India queried his words. 'Joint defence union? Against whom?' The Prime Minister looked towards me.

The '50 Years No War Pact' between Pakistan and India, which I was proposing, consisted of a yearly 1% reduction for five years in defence budgets on both sides, which comprises up to 25% of their total budgets. The money saved from this reduction would subsequently be spent on Education and Health provision and facilities. Another important point on the agenda was to request the Pakistani Premier to grant India the 'Most Favoured Nation' (MFN) status. For me, the hostility between the neighbours was the chief catalyst behind growing extremism on both sides. Signing this pact meant a reduction in hostility, which would lead to the curbing of extremism. My basic foundation for this proposal stemmed from my interest in European history, through which I had learnt that arch enemies like Germany, France and Britain, who once could not even tolerate each another, had evolved into active partners in supranational bodies such as the EU, NATO, and G8. Their ambition and commitment to peace reaped huge dividends for the region, both socially as well as economically. This transformation helped ordinary European people to raise their living standards within a short span of time. If these European rivals could reconcile and work towards the region's prosperity after two world wars, why not India and Pakistan?

'Sayeen, I believe that if we are unable to establish peace with India, peace in the whole of South Asia will remain a pipe dream,' I tried to further elaborate the point. As his eyes wandered around the room, Gilani seemed to be all ears.

'Let me explain, please. In our view, Pakistan's quest for survival,

the nuclear capability, the arms race with India, the Kargil War, and the doctrine of 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan – are all born out of an insecure mindset. There is a huge crisis of confidence, trust deficit and a psychology of fear and insecurity that taints the prism on both sides. We don't think that Pakistani and Indian military forces will be able to resolve these disputes, nor should we need them to resolve it. This vital step has to be taken by the political leadership on both sides of the border. The politicians must bite the bullet due to the huge baggage of history. The Lahore Declaration was a giant step forward in this respect but unfortunately the Kargil War undid the whole progress, and we went back to square one.'

Gilani seemed to writhe in his chair. Perhaps he didn't appreciate the credit given to his rival, Mian Nawaz Sharif – the former Prime Minister of Pakistan. But I felt we had to recognise the strengths of others and have a cross-party supported approach to Kashmir.

'With the help of prominent British Indians and British Pakistanis and their diasporas, FIRD has laid a foundation to build bridges of peace and understanding between the two countries. Today, it is more about galvanising people to people relations. The long-term achievement will be the 50 Years No War Pact – it is going to be the culminating point of this drive. Peace between India and Pakistan is not only necessary for sustaining economic growth but also vital for building pluralistic democracies and sustaining the integrity of both states. South Asia today stands suspended between the hope of a better life and the fear of cataclysmic ruin. It is not only one of the poorest regions in the world but also a region whose citizens live in constant fear and danger of a nuclear war. The latest threat is the rise of the extremists and militants in the Indian and Pakistani military. We can fight terrorists and extremists, but it takes an entirely lethal angle when it comes from men in uniform. Pakistan may have the mightier nuclear power, but is that the future we want for our children and grandchildren?'

I uttered these words with a clear understanding that I was entering into extremely contentious, political hot waters. The Pakistan-India conflict had become so sensitive that it would deter anybody without a strong resolve. I was able to remind the Premier that our shared city of Multan had taken leading steps in building



better people to people relations with India. At a time when there was not much support for peaceful relations with India at grassroots level, I gathered some like-minded people to arrange a peace walk in the hope of better relations and peace between Pakistan and India.

‘This is indeed a noble pursuit, Qureshi Sahib, but you must know that there are a number of obstacles to this, not least international influences and more pertinent matters at home that may take priority for the top leadership. Yet, a fellow Multani taking this one is encouraging, and I will support this cause in whatever way I can. I must give a word of caution – not to do so would be irresponsible of me – so please take baby steps and be careful who this proposal is taken to as some quarters may not want this to succeed,’ Premier Gilani responded.

The psychological state of fear and insecurity had become the breeding ground for jingoism and militancy. Hate icons symbolised the institutionalisation of animosity, which ultimately boiled down to anti-Pakistan versus crush-India frenzy. The most unnerving news was the involvement of senior military officers, both in Pakistan and India, in acts of terrorism or with sympathies and ties with the militants.

Receiving the proposal with positive prospects, Premier Gilani invited the team to visit Pakistan to assess the on-ground realities after conducting discussions with media houses, opinion makers, think-tanks and the real movers and shakers from within the ‘establishment’. It was quite heartening to know that there was substantial progress on granting India the Most Favoured Nation status. Not that the credit can be claimed, but one can indeed hope!

It seemed from the start that the doves had a thousand miles to fly from India and Pakistan. It was a long flight to peace. But almost one and a half billion human lives were hanging on it.

# Let's Lay the Foundations

“

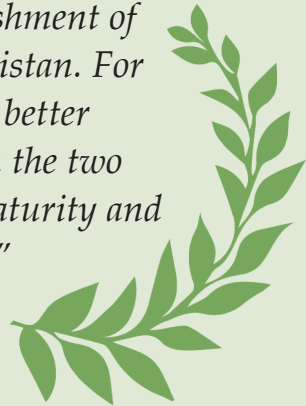
*We have met the enemy and he is us.*

”

Walt Kelly, Pogo

May 2011

*“Let me quote the Indian Army Chief in the wake of the Bin Laden operation where he mentioned that Indians would have carried out a similar exercise of surgical strike in Pakistan as well.’ The General sounded annoyed. ‘It is a profound statement. Though we have Dr. Manmohan Singh who is little more than a run-of-the-mill politician, who is held hostage by Bal Thakrey and Modi, the two anti-Pakistan rabble rousers of Indian politics.’ The General was visibly dismayed about the prospects. He further shed light on the Indian military’s role in the country’s stance on Kashmir, Siachin, Sir Creek, and the establishment of various consulates in Pakistan. For him, the key to unlocking better relations and ties between the two countries was political maturity and the will to move forward.”*



Either we were the biggest goofs on the face of earth, or we have been harbouring Osama bin Laden in his sanctuary, guarded by our very own secret services. There are no two ways about it!' a roving reporter concluded as he thumped the table and yelled to the room in an ethereal silence.

It was the fifth day of our stay in the federal capital after the OBL incident. The last four days in Islamabad seemed like living through a nightmare.

We ducked into the Serena Hotel in Islamabad. It looked eerie with its Mughal architecture bordering the headquarters of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) – one of the most feared and talked about secret service agencies in the world.

Buried under the pile of newspapers and magazines, we were watching the private channels blaring out views of the so-called strategists and experts on a non-stop basis. All our meetings were either cancelled or postponed due to the OBL catastrophe. There were mixed signals coming from various informed circles. Some would swear OBL was dead a long time ago and others would bet their lives on it being *an American drama like 9/11*. A small number would close the doors, hush us down and whisper in our ears, *He was always there as their strategic asset. Americans wanted to put on a show, so they succeeded*. Conspiracy theories were rife. It was the best time to say anything and get away with it.

It was also one of the thickest smoke screens I ever tried to navigate in all my years.

On the international stage, it was quite a circus. The extraordinary discovery that Osama bin Laden had been living, possibly since 2005, in a luxury compound in a popular summer resort a short drive from the national capital, Islamabad, was a huge global embarrassment for the Government of Pakistan. Extremely pointed questions were being asked by national and international media about whether the ISI, or its various branches and underlings, knew of the existence of the highly unusual, heavily fortified, and expensively built compound in Abbottabad, 120 miles north of Islamabad – and of its high-value, low-profile tenant. Tellingly, the Government of Pakistan was not informed beforehand of the American Special Forces' raid. The fact of the matter is that US officials would simply not have

trusted their counterparts in the ISI and the civilian government with such sensitive information.

Pakistani analysts were bewildered that while the Government of Pakistan had issued a statement acknowledging Bin Laden's arrest and death, the military and ISI were strangely silent.

The day after the raid, the Pakistan Government lashed out at the US, saying that the United States had taken '*an unauthorized unilateral action*' that would not be tolerated in the future. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs further said, '*Such an event shall not serve as a future precedent for any state, including the United States.*'

Pakistan's President, Mr. Asif Ali Zardari, dismissed charges of harbouring OBL as '*baseless speculation*'. The very next day, he snubbed those who doubted that Pakistan lacked vitality in its pursuit of terrorism as the war on terrorism was as much Pakistan's war as it was America's. *Washington Post*.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani, came up with another discomfited expression. In his earlier statement he termed it a 'great victory' in the war against terror. Later, he was found acknowledging the discovery as an intelligence failure – not of Pakistan alone but of the entire world, which may have sounded a bit naïve at the time.

Another section claimed that Pakistan had a role in the operation, but it did not air its claim too loudly to avoid an adverse reaction at home and in the Muslim world at large, for some had seen him as a freedom fighter. Hamid Mir, a high-profile Pakistan journalist and anchor person, said on TV that he had confirmation to the effect that the army was involved in the operation. There were other notable journalists who suggested that ISI had prior knowledge, with its Director General, Lieutenant General Ahmad Shuja Pasha and other military commentators saying they were a part of the operation.

Surprisingly, Pakistan's military officials declined to make any comments and notably shifted responsibility to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After the operation, Pakistan's ISI admitted that there had been an intelligence failure. An official stated that the same compound had been raided in 2003 but that since then, it had not been monitored. However, this account was disputed by American officials who said that satellite photos show that even as late as 2004,

the site was an empty field. Pakistan's Military Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, called the operation a '*misadventure*' and stated that no further raids would be tolerated. In addition, he announced that the number of private American military personnel in Pakistan would be reduced '*to the minimum essential*'.

The Pakistani Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Rao Qamar Suleman, admitted that it had been '*an air-surveillance failure*'. He stated that the air space was unable to detect the American helicopters because the radar installed on the western borders were inactive on the day of the incident. The US helicopters also reportedly used radar-evading measures, such as stealth technology, to avoid detection.

*'If Bin Laden's presence was not known to Pakistan's security agencies when he was located close to the Kakul Military Academy, it will be viewed as either their incompetence or overconfidence'*. This was the most often repeated quip during the debates and discussions.

I recall my conversation with a young Pakistani news reporter. He was taken to visit OBL's mansion by security officials and returned the same day. With a red and tensed face, he blurted out, 'We have been sold out by our army, agencies, government, and politicians. We, a nation of 180 million, have been caught red handed and posted on Facebook. Pakistanis are cowed and chagrined.'

Perhaps he was expressing what most Pakistanis felt that time but couldn't spit it out.



Our last major interaction was taking place at an Islamabad-based think-tank, the 'Centre for Research and Security Studies' (CRSS). I was invited there to interact with some of the heavyweights of the Pakistani media, bureaucracy, and military by its Executive Director, Mr. Imtiaz Gul, a policy analyst whom I met at a conference organised by the International Centre for Counter Terrorism in the Hague in 2009. CRSS was located in a posh sector of Islamabad. When I arrived there, the room was packed with former

ambassadors, foreign service officers, retired generals, and media activists. Among them, General Syed Amjad Hussain, former Chairman of National Reconstruction Bureau (NRB) and Mr. Masood Sharif Khattak, former Director General of Intelligence Bureau (IB), stood out. I delivered my speech to the group and apprised them of the groundwork that had been carried out in London. The audience was a little surprised when I stated that we kicked off our counter radicalisation programmes much before 9/11 and 7/7 in London when we noticed a big change in our area with people being recruited and taken to Karachi, to be moved to Lahore to travel to Peshawar, with the final destination being Afghanistan. The concept of a Muslim-led organisation being proactive, and preventative was an unfamiliar idea to them. The community and the intelligence agencies both shut their eyes to it. Unfortunately, after the departure of the former Soviet Union, Afghanistan was left in the lurch with next to no infrastructure and with millions worth in weapons; recruiting 'Jihadists' had become big business and it attracted players from across the globe as well.

I implored the audience not to forget that this entire effort was carried out before 9/11 and although it was extremely difficult for a Muslim-led institution to talk about extremism and terrorism, given that Muslims feared discussing these issues would label them as such, it was possible, and its approach was effective. We were made punchbags by our Muslim community in general, and we received a lot of heat from Pakistanis. Gradually, we got over the attacks. We were the only organisation in Europe that designed a programme to counter radicalisation and to address economic marginalisation among Muslims. The programme was executed from 2004 to 2008 and later evaluated by Middlesex University.

I believed that we had to take control and the lead on reducing the problems between India and Pakistan.

'Our initiative - the 50 Years No War Pact with India is a litmus test of what we can achieve through the Pakistani and Indian diasporas. We plan to launch a campaign to soften the institutions which are a hindrance in this peace process.' I struck the initial note looking at them intently.

'Your endeavour is jinxed,' Imtiaz Gul chuckled. 'The issue of

Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad has eclipsed all other issues and probably it's not the right time to work out a thaw in India-Pakistan relations.'

Most of the participants in the room nodded in agreement with his comments.

'I would term it a step in the right direction, however, with all my reservations attached,' said Mr. Tariq Fatimi, a seasoned diplomat and Pakistan's ambassador to various countries. 'There were lots of global institutes and think-tanks involved in this particular effort of what is known as track-II. Usually, the first question to arise in such kinds of endeavours is: who is marketing and campaigning, and on whose behalf? British? Indian? American? Pakistani?'

I could trace some smiles on a few faces.

'And if the Indian media was to be believed, Indians were of the view that media reports about Osama bin Laden's death indicated a degree of duplicity and treacherous motive in the Pakistani establishment that made the task of reaching out to Pakistan far more difficult than before,' Fatimi continued. 'In my view, India represented two diametrically different points of view. For example, all those people who had long postings in Delhi and sat on the India desk and negotiated with India had either become jaded or have become cynical and lost hope in the name of realism.' Fatimi sounded as if he himself had given up on the very idea and it was not the start to the conversation that I wanted.

Fatimi expected that India's acceptance of Pakistan in its true sense could help start a political dialogue. He also thought that military establishments and conflicts on the borders were a major cause for disruption of the peace process between both the neighbours.

General Amjad readied himself to speak next. He had grey hair and a farmer's features. The former President Musharraf appointed him as Chairman of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). Unfortunately, NAB's much touted 'accountability drive' fell on its face after Musharraf's exit and he took a lot of flak for that, despite many things being out of his control. However, General Amjad was respected for being a patriot and an honest soldier in all quarters.

'Let me quote the Indian Army Chief in the wake of the Bin Laden



operation where he mentioned that Indians would have carried out a similar exercise of surgical strike in Pakistan as well.' The General sounded annoyed. 'It is a profound statement. Though we have Dr. Manmohan Singh who is little more than a run-of-the-mill politician, who is held hostage by Bal Thakrey and Modi, the two anti-Pakistan rabble rousers of Indian politics.' The General was visibly dismayed about the prospects. He further shed light on the Indian military's role in the country's stance on Kashmir, Siachin, Sir Creek, and the establishment of various consulates in Pakistan. For him, the key to unlocking better relations and ties between the two countries was political maturity and the will to move forward.

The former chief of Pakistan's premier spy agency, the Intelligence Bureau (IB), Mr. Masood Sharif Khattak, was next to share his thoughts. Khattak had an impressive presence with his grey moustache, thick hair, and a warrior's face. He retired as a Major from the Pakistan Army but rose through the ranks due to his close connections with the Bhutto family. His experience in India before the 1965 war was an eye opener as, according to him, Indians and Pakistanis didn't have any bad feelings towards each other.

While expressing his views on the Kashmir conflict he said, 'Isn't it ironic that all big conflicts had been resolved in the world except the 1948 United Nations resolution on Kashmir? Let me make it simple. Without progress on the core issues of conflict, any peace initiative would melt down. If the US and UN could get involved in East Timor, Sudan, Bosnia, and to some extent the Israel-Palestine conflict, why couldn't they influence both Indian and Pakistani governments to resolve their conflicts. Look at President Obama, who nominated Richard Holbrook as his ambassador to India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan but the Indians said, 'nothing doing' and his title was changed. A day might come when the masses could travel between the two countries without any restrictions as in the EU, but it will remain a pipe dream without the resolution of the core problems.' Khattak asserted.

This was the most popular stance in most of the circles closer to the 'Pakistani Establishment'. Khattak also sounded sceptical about our 50 years no war pact proposal with India.

'We, in the last sixty-three years, have seen the making and

breaking of the Soviet Union but the Kashmir dispute still remained unresolved.' The voice of Ayaz Wazir rang out. He came from an influential Waziri tribe in the Federal Administered Tribal Area (FATA). He had served as an ambassador of Pakistan.

Most of the old guard in India and Pakistan would stick to this mantra of resolving the old disputes and then going forward, which choked out any progress in the conflict zones. We desperately needed a *paradigm shift*.

'Our next war will be about water rights.' Water expert, Mr. Arshad Abbasi, opened his lips in a sombre tone. Abbasi had been involved within both governmental and non-governmental sides. Recently, conflicting interpretations of the Indus Water Treaty had made headlines. Pakistan had threatened to seek intervention from the International Court of Arbitration (ICA). He believed that the misinterpretation of the Indus Water treaty by experts on both sides was the root cause of the water issue getting this serious, beyond necessary.

'Because thirty-five percent of our water depends on India; we have to cooperate, otherwise there is no chance. The problem is that generals take Siachen as a territory but ignore its environmental value. It is the second longest glacier on the planet. Unfortunately, due to the presence of the army it is melting at an unprecedented rate. We conducted a study five years ago and we shared the study with India. At that time, the chairman of the IPCC (Inter-government Panel for Climate Change) also made a request to the Indian Government to vacate the glacier and convert it into a peace park for the sake of the environment because the environment has no borders.' Abbasi's words seemed to echo in the room. 'And when it really got worse, we tried to bring in the neutral umpires for the love of cricket. Hope it works,' Abbasi chuckled, and everyone grinned widely in response.

Gulmina Bilal was the only lady present in the session. She looked like a woman in her early thirties. She was working in an NGO dedicated to children's health and safety.

'I think you know that I have a vested interest in peace with India because it is a shopping haven for me. So, I would be the first person to say yes.' Gulmina believed that radical elements were present on

both sides of the border, - extremists in Pakistan or the right-wing nationalists in India, and young generations in both countries had been exposed to hate-filled curricula. That was where the governments needed to focus – the mindset of the people.

‘I think you are in the wrong country if you want to gather people’s views that would surprise you or have any meaning or any bearing on the outcome you are seeking, which is a fifty year no war pact,’ leading columnist, Mr. Mosharraf Zaidi, said in a grim tone. He was serious looking through glasses and a goatee beard. Zaidi came up with a different notion altogether; according to him, a vast majority of people in Pakistan did not consider India as an enemy as the people had many other things than India to hate. He wasn’t convinced because, apart from the three major wars between the two countries and other incidents, there was little to signify that hatred existed between the peoples as it was the governments.

I could see different and varied expressions on most faces while Zaidi continued: ‘And this should not be surprising for anyone because Indians and Pakistanis used to be just Indians and the ostensible reason that from Indians, we became Indians and Pakistanis was because we love our beef and steaks and apparently, they don’t. But there is an eleven-hundred-year-old history until 1905, when to the best of my knowledge, if there was any mob violence or if there were Hindu-Muslim riots, then they clearly weren’t recorded well in history. So, this emergence of the distinction between the Indian Muslim nationality and the non-Muslim Indian nationality is recent, and of course Pakistan itself is recent. The Pakistan that you are sitting in is often spoken of as if it came into being in 1947 but that was a different country twice the size it is today. Then, it had an eastern and western wing, and it was much more diverse. This was the Pakistan where more than half the population spoke Bengali as their first language. So, the Pakistan that you are in is really a forty-year-old country with a twenty-year history of military dictators supported by republican presidential administrations, and a twenty-year history of complete political dysfunction that is supported by and endorsed by the people of Pakistan.’

It was clear that those from a military background had become agitated. Zaidi further argued that even with all official efforts from Pakistan, India was not reciprocating as it should have been. That was why the problem was India, and not Pakistan. He stopped and looked at me quizzically. That was the point where Imtiaz Gul intervened.

‘Very true!’ He nodded his head. Imtiaz then rued the fact that a lot of anger against Pakistan in India is primarily down to the media as he once had to shout on the NDTV news channel and complained about the ill-mannered anchors. According to him, after interviewing Pakistani experts, the Indian media ridiculed them by spinning against their analysis.

Next, Arif Ayub, former Ambassador and president of the institute of Regional Studies (IRS), shared his insight:

‘I can understand your fears Mr. Qureshi. Since India and Pakistan, are nuclear weapons states, it goes without question that we act as though we agree that there should be a no war pact. I was in Nepal on a posting and the Nepalese said that the Kashmir problem is a three-generation problem. The first generation creates the problem, the second tries to do something about it but muddles through, and the third will solve it. So, we have to wait for the third generation as we are still in the muddling-through stage and that you can see in both countries.’ These golden words by Ayub were an encouraging sign for peacemakers like me as they reaffirmed the fact that all of us still have something to contribute towards peace on a personal level.

‘Manmohan Singh and Sartaj Aziz were in the South Commission. Mr. Aziz is a very decent person, but he is hesitant, and you saw it on Wikileaks that he is trying his best to improve relations, but he is not a politician. He is scared of the right wingers; and the extremists. Sonia Gandhi is the same; she is Italian, so she can’t do anything. Despite the best goodwill in the world, she unfortunately is facing multiple problems. It reminds me of the good old proverb: Sometimes the way to hell is paved through noble intentions,’ said an emotional intervening Khattak, sighing and looking sardonically at all of us.

‘I would like to say in a blunt manner, talking about all this is very

nice but if we really want to achieve things, there are two basic things that you have to address and the West has to do it,' Khattak interjected. 'One – they have to treat India and Pakistan equally and bring them towards a process of genuine peace. I clearly see India as the darling of the West while Pakistan is the regular punchbag.' Khattak also criticised the West for giving unconditional support to India and taking its side when it came to issuing official statements on terrorism in South Asia. He said that had it not been for Pakistan standing with the West in its Afghan War, it would have been impossible to win the war against the Taliban. Furthermore, he argued that Pakistan had been keeping India's back garden safe, without which, India would suffer immensely from terrorism.

Ayaz Wazir held up his hand in protest. 'Mr. Khattak, we have met the enemy and he is us.' He quoted Walt Kelly's character, Pogo. 'It is so unfortunate that we have initiated the wars like the 1965 War or Kargil. We have been at the helm of almost every problem. I am not accusing my country of all evils but just mentioning it as a reality check. We are not terrorists but the image that we have built up until now, keeping past events in mind and looking at Osama's discovery, consider yourself for a minute as an Indian or any foreign national and consider how you would look at Pakistan. Would you be listening to Khattak's argument or Wazir's arguments or focus on the country's image as a whole? This incident took place on Sunday, and you are not coming with a clear-cut message about Osama bin Laden; what are you projecting abroad?'

Silence enveloped the hall for a few seconds.

Khattak retaliated, 'You are right Wazir, but you missed one part of my argument. I said that this area has been a battle ground not so much for our battles but for the world at large. We didn't invite Osama and Co to visit us. These were transported here to save the 'free world'. So, the world must look at the bigger picture. I am not defending anything. Wrong is wrong, but the point is that the world has to come into the picture in Afghanistan and Kashmir. India and Pakistan cannot solve these issues on their own. If you want peace in the region it will have to be brought about by world activity.'

The conversation had gone awry and taken a wrong turn. Now all eyes were fixed on me to prove how and why this was worth

pursuing. I knew I had a difficult job. When it came to India and Pakistan, the past used to dictate the future and that was the fundamental error in the entire equation.

'Well, how about starting off with a funny expression... every angel has a past, and every devil has a future. When we look at India and Pakistan, there is no harm in borrowing the other models which worked. With hatred for each other and centuries of bloodletting, England, France, and Germany are now part of the European Union. We have seen England and Ireland as parts of one country. Quite regularly, documentaries on German Nazis are shown in the British media as a constant reminder of the Holocaust.' I noticed a few heads were nodding.

'In Northern Ireland, the Irish community was a strong believer that London was an invader in their country. In the UK's eyes, those who fought back were terrorists. They still have very high walls with the murals of their storied soldiers. I don't know how many of you have been to Northern Ireland, but if you go there, you will still see them. The Catholics could not enter the Anglican side and vice versa. This is in Europe; but still, they have found a way to bring peace and those people who were not shown on TV at all because of the broadcasting ban, like Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams, were convicted as terrorists. Now those very people are enjoying a cup of tea with the Queen and have also become part of the political solution by joining as ministers and members of parliament. I think we still have hope that we can somehow work together and achieve peace. I appreciate the comments of the others, especially that it may take the third generation to resolve the issue, since the new generation is more connected on a global level through social media and the like. The other points were water management, Kashmir and the issue of Kargil and Siachen. I strongly believe that if there are two brothers, they fight, and eventually they will have a wall in their courtyard. It doesn't matter if the children of those two brothers come together and talk about it. 'Why is this wall here?' The parents wouldn't allow them to bring down that wall but eventually those children will think that if they have a big courtyard, they might be able to play cricket here... we might be able to play football here... or we could have a bigger place. I think a law, or a pact is a long-term solution, but in

the short to medium term, we can open dialogue, trade, ease travel restrictions, and find more reasons to be friends rather than foes,' I remarked vigorously.

We were swimming against the odds. The baggage of history was a backbreaking toil. 1947, 1965, 1971, 1983, 1999, and 2008 were filled with bloody pages. But someone had to start off somewhere. I felt exhausted fighting against the grain, so to speak, and then tried to sum it up on a positive note. I recollected Faiz Ahmed Faiz's famous poem that somehow summed up the meeting.

*'Chalo utho zameen khoden*

(Let's dig the soil together)

*Aur Es men apney dil Bo dein*

(and sow the seeds of our hearts)

*Karen abaad es ko aarzuon ke paseney se*

(and raise the crop together with our sweat and blood)

*Ke es berang Jeeney se*

(as this colourless life)

*Na Tum khush ho*

*Na mein khush hun!!!'*

(would weigh heavy on our shoulders for nothing, otherwise).

# Nukes or Nutcrackers?

“

*It sends out a very clear message:  
'Mess with us and we'll do  
something worse than kill you.  
We'll kill your children.*

”

**Suzanne Collins,**  
The Hunger Games



*May 2011 - 'Pakistan India Relations:  
Prospects and Retrospect'*

*"Pakistan's backwardness is because of corrupt practices in all walks of life. We spend around eighteen per cent of our total budget on defence, so we are told, and if eighty-two percent of the budget is spent on economic development in real terms, we would not lag behind any country of the world. So, it is not cutting the budget. It is spending it well that would work."*



**I**f we can't throw the atom bomb on Bombay or Calcutta, then why the heck did we go nuclear? Is it only to show off and no good at all?' Murmurs filled the air and then the room soon hushed to pin drop silence.

This was an attempt at satire on Pakistan's military capabilities in the wake of *Operation Geronimo*, which had made the security apparatus the butt of jokes. Cringeworthy as the joke was, perhaps he was not wrong at all.

Lahore, the capital of Punjab, was much warmer but less eerie with the noise preceding *Operation Geronimo*.

We were sitting with the front ranked media persons at the 'Pearl Continental' Hotel – the only 5-star deluxe hotel in Lahore. With its plush furniture, sophisticated business centre, classical piano music playing in the background, fully functioning AC and smartly dressed English speaking staff, one would be whisked into a different realm away from the hot, humid, and burning realities of Pakistan.

We were in the heart of Pakistan's second largest and most thriving city of Lahore. Situated in the business area, major corporate offices, the Governor's house, banks, buying houses, shopping malls, a national theatre, the parliament house, and the stock exchange building were located just a stone's throw away, making it the convenient hotel for the businessman. The Pearl Continental is on the famous Mall Road in Lahore; a heritage location and features the architecture of both the colonial times and the modern era. Its modern structural design and the atrium lobby add to the overall ambience.

Our first meeting was arranged by my friend, Naeem Baloch, who invited some seasoned journalists for the discussion. Ata ur Rehman, Sajaad Mir, Rizwan Razi, Arshad Arif, Amir Hashim Khakwani, Rauf Tahir, Ajmal Shah Din, Mian Ahmad Yar, M. Shoaib Adil, Khalid Chaudhry, Naeem Arif, Khalid Mehmood Khalid, Anees Mufti, and Imtiaz-ul-Haq were a few of the leading names present at the dialogue. They were representing newspapers, TV channels, radio, and magazines.

I briefed the audience on the purpose of our visit and gave them the background on our proposal regarding the '50 Years No War

Pact between India and Pakistan'. However, I made it clear that the real intent was to feel the pulse within important Pakistani quarters on the thorniest issue of all time, so we were there to listen to their perspectives. I was all ears when the dialogue kicked off.

Right at the beginning of the discussion it became obvious that the media persons were divided into three groups, poles apart from one another in their opinions on the Pakistan India No War Pact. The first group was pro-military or pro-establishment. In their opinion, India was solely responsible for wars, distrust, enmity and hatred across the borders. They insisted that India never acknowledged Pakistan's existence and tried to unravel it from day one. For them, militarising Pakistan was the need of the hour and they also advocated 'importing' Mujahedeen to Indian-held Kashmir. They also insisted that 'Ghazwa e Hind' (the holy war of India) against India was inevitable. Someone quoted a veteran Pakistani journalist and editor-in-chief of a famous daily newspaper who once commanded in his will: *I shall be fired at India from a nuclear warhead.*

The second was generally the 'pro-India' group. Most of them were the veteran communists-cum-socialists. They believed that the Establishment in Pakistan was the fountainhead of all the problems. It was the 'garrison state' perspective and 'Two Nations Theory' which brought all the calamities to the country which had swiftly descended into chaos. They argued that the ISI was still actively supporting militants to rub the Americans' noses in the dirt in Afghanistan. They insisted that the double game had become a double-edged sword which was going to cut the military itself as the snake had outgrown its master. Pakistan was betting heavily on 'non state actors' and the 'Mumbai Attacks' were the ISI's brainchild.

The third group consisted of comparatively fewer people. They sounded the most pragmatic and realistic. They acknowledged that both countries had made blunders in the last six decades which strengthened the militants on both sides of the divide. However, they wanted to move on instead of sticking to one point. They referred to the models in recent history where warring nations made peace, and believed it was possible for Pakistan and India

as well. They referred to Quai-e-Azam, founder of Pakistan, who dreamed and wanted to see Pakistan and India evolving together on the model of the Canada-United States relationship. However, their voice was muffled by the 'war cries' of the two other groups.

'The pact for fifty years between the two countries is a fascinating idea which will, no doubt, cut defence budget spending of both the countries, enabling them to spend it on the welfare of their people and economic uplift,' said Ata ur Rehman. 'However, it is for India to be committed to the pact as it often says that it has nothing to do with Pakistan, and its military establishment is for defence against China,' he commented.

'People from both countries need to understand the fact that they have to do something solid to improve the ties between them. Fair minded Indians and Pakistanis have to come forward to take the reins in their hands to help resolve the bilateral issues,' said Sajad Mir, a popular columnist and TV anchor.

'India had given Pakistan the status of Most Favoured Nation (MFN). However, Pakistani traders could not properly export to India as it had put up twenty-four trade barriers. On the other hand, Pakistan has given India a free hand to export products to Pakistan. India should be fair in its dealings with Pakistan for a good relationship between the two countries,' Rizwan Razi said emphatically.

Mr. Irshad Ahmad Arif looked less impressed with the proposal. He scratched his beard for a few seconds and hesitantly commented, 'Cutting the defence budget does not make any difference as there are many nations in the world which have been making progress equally on defence and social fronts. There is a need to properly spend our education and health budgets. Our issues cannot be solved by signing the no war pact until we come forward with good intentions to resolve other issues.'

The progressive group sighed. It was obvious the talk was destined to be derailed now and it hit us in the face when Amir Khakwani took his turn. 'The Kashmir issue has to be resolved to develop strong ties between the two countries. No pact would do anything as when war starts all pacts prove to be futile. Both countries need to resolve their mutual issues and Kashmir is the

biggest of all.'

Sure, that was the road most travelled. Solve all the issues. Start talking about the most contentious ones. Hold your ground and do some tough talk. Back to square one.

'We need to be truthful in our dealings, and have faith in each other,' Rauf Tahir said. 'Pakistan's backwardness is because of corrupt practices in all walks of life. We spend around eighteen per cent of our total budget on defence, so we are told, and if eighty-two per cent of the budget is spent on economic development in real terms, we would not lag behind any country of the world. So, it is not cutting the budget. It is spending it well that would work.'

This was another puzzle. Pakistan's military budget has always been a mystery. Perhaps nobody could claim to have the exact figures. The figures presented in Parliament usually did not include over 73 billion Pakistani Rupees (435 million GBP) allocated for pensions of military personnel which would be paid from the civilian budget and a separate allocation for security-related expenses.

Maqsood and Imtiaz-ul-Haq said there was a dire need to probe the factors which led to the sabotage of peace talks as whenever peace talks started, they were derailed for one reason or another.

'On both sides there are elements that want to destroy efforts of peace in the region. However, serious minded people of both countries have long desired strong relations between the two countries and peace in the region. But then there are powerful war cartels who prefer fighting than making peace,' Ajmal Shah Din said, and a few participants nodded in approval.

Khalid Chaudhry was the first one to think out of the box. 'If both countries want peace in the region, they should set aside their core issues for the time being and go forward to compromise on smaller things, and afterwards there would be opportunities to resolve the core issues.'

'We need to find more reasons for making peace and people-to-people contact; by easing up the visa procedures and increasing trade, we could make it happen,' Shoaib Adil said. 'However, I wonder whether the civil and military leadership on both sides would change their attitudes,' he muttered.

Nayyar Khan represented the disenchanted group. 'I met the enemy, and it was us,' he asserted. 'Before we insist on Indians walking the new track, we need to change our posture. The insecurity syndrome has been planted so deep in our subconscious that it is almost impossible to uproot. However, we need to believe that no one is coming after us,' he insisted.

At the beginning of the session, I was warned by Naeem Baloch that most of the participants had conflicting views on national security, government policies and the future, so it would be a tough task to manage all of them in a single room. Surprisingly, they turned out to be a refined mix and although at certain times I felt there might be a scuffle in the making, which wasn't the case. We were here to pick their brains on one of the most sensitive and avoided topics in Pakistani media. The media had taken the driving seat since Musharraf's time and television anchors were enjoying the celebrity status that engulfed them. The cut-throat competition added to the bank balance of notable columnists as well, and salaries in the millions had become the norm.

Our discussion titled *Pakistan-India Relations: Prospects and Retrospect*, took off on a pleasant note but soon turned sour when a renowned right-wing columnist and anchor threatened to nuke India.

The nuclear bomb was one of the most darling weapons of mass destruction in Pakistan. It was touted as the recipe of deterrence against the ten times larger and 'aggressive' India. Pakistan's plan to go nuclear was initiated by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, founder of the Pakistan Peoples' Party, and later pampered by all successive governments until Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif decided to go nuclear on 28 May 1999. The nuclear programme was molycoddled by almost all politicians, who were mainly banking on the psyche of insecurity and threat from India in the wake of East Bengal's secession from Pakistan as Bangladesh in 1971, when approximately one hundred thousand civilian and armed forces surrendered to Indian General Jagjit Singh Arora on Dhaka's Pulton Ground. That insult was a fresh wound that shaped the new Pakistan after 1971.

It was difficult to determine the actual size and composition of

India and Pakistan's nuclear arsenals, but it was estimated that both countries had a total of 50 to 75 weapons – although some have even suggested close to 100. Contrary to conventional wisdom, India had slightly fewer than Pakistan. Both countries had fission weapons similar to the early designs developed by the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Their explosive yields are estimated to be 5 to 25 kilotons. Pakistan's main nuclear weapons were believed to be mounted on missiles while India's nuclear weapons were reportedly gravity bombs deployed on fighter aircraft.

The entire world was scared by the bloodcurdling scenarios of a nuclear holocaust in South Asia that risked almost one fifth of all human lives. This fear was exacerbated by political instability, rising extremism in Pakistan, the Saffronisation of Indian politics and proximity. Being neighbours, nuclear missiles would arrive within minutes in case of an attack, meaning the leaders would have little time to verify intelligence about each other's intentions. Given the fear of having his small arsenal destroyed and the short decision timetable, either nation's leader might then order a nuclear attack based on faulty reports that the other was preparing to strike. The need to quickly arm the weapons might be misconstrued by the other side as presaging an imminent launch, leading that state to launch. There are various scenarios and all with ghastly implications. Threats of using nuclear weapons have been made in the past.

Pakistan's nuclear programme particularly put US and other Western countries on edge due to scaremongering which referred to the 'Islamic bomb' and the vulnerability of its protecting and launching mechanism. However, people in highly-placed circles in the Ministry of Defence in Pakistan were quoted in the international press several times that, saying that in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks in the US in 2001 and nuclear proliferation charges levelled against the founder of Pakistan's nuclear program, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, in 2003, Pakistani authorities had taken drastic steps to improve the institutional framework and operational procedures for the country's atomic arsenal, with a view to preventing any further proliferation of nuclear-related

technologies and materials.

A spokesman at the US Embassy, Mark E Stroh, recalled, 'President Obama had remarked in March 2010 during the Nuclear Security Summit: 'I feel confident about Pakistan's security around its nuclear weapons programs'.'

The discussion at the conference picked up in a pleasant manner. Right from the beginning, I noticed the fissures between participants based on perspectives; one heavily traditional right wing where the ideology of Pakistan and pan-Islamic roots coloured the prism, and the other one with a slightly leftist and liberal tone which would focus on opening out to the rest of the world and living in harmony and peace. I was also intrigued that the right wingers were heavily backing the Pakistan military and doctrine of establishment. However, the other group was aligning with the liberal tone and was a severe critic of the military's stakes in politics.

I found the majority of participants agreeing that a no war pact for a period of fifty years should be inked between Pakistan and India to avoid the perils of war and urging the process of composite dialogue to be continued without any interruption between the two countries.

I informed the audience that we were there to engage and consult politicians, intelligentsia, opinion makers, executives and statutory bodies of both the governments to initiate meaningful dialogue, eventually culminating in a summit and possibly brokering a fifty years 'No War Pact' between India and Pakistan.

'Please go home and dust off some book and read what the hell on earth you are talking about,' The editor of a leftist weekly retorted when the option of going onto nuclear attack was aired. Most of the participants groaned in discomfort.

Somehow, it finally erupted into a scuffle when a few hot words were exchanged on the involvement of the Pakistani military's role in sabotaging the relationship with India. I can't recall how it started but it caused quite a stir.

'You better shut up!' someone shouted. 'I know you are on their payroll.'

'Well, then we almost all know whose payroll you are on!' The



accused snapped back at the accuser.

‘It is still good to be on the payroll of your own country’s spy agency compared to the enemy’s’ the other one hit back.

A senior journalist intervened and calmed them both down. Before the discussion got worse, I made my observations to the audience.

‘Gentlemen, first, I understand your concerns. But we should maintain a pragmatic narrative, without taking any sides. Second, the security agencies, especially the spy agencies, must take certain measures to ensure national security, which citizens like us may not be able to understand on certain occasions. Why do you think that the CIA carries out various activities even amid all the criticism that it gets from all over the globe? Or why does the Israeli Army (IDF) attack Palestinians disproportionately? Yes, for me, both may be wrong, but there has to be a method to this madness. By quoting these examples, I am by no means supporting them nor our Army’s alleged interference in India, yet we must keep in mind their perspective as well. Thirdly, the military should also reflect upon the fact that a country like Israel, with a similar history and age to that of Pakistan, has advanced far more technologically. The corridors of power in Pakistan must not be content in just having the nukes but must also focus on industrial advancement and self-sufficiency in other areas such as energy, technology, and social welfare,’ I said. ‘We must have the ability of calling a spade a spade rather than accusing one another of being on someone’s payroll. Veteran journalists like you have to create an informed discourse among the masses, who are looking up to you, but if you fight without showing tolerance and acceptance of a different opinion, it will not take us anywhere.’

I guess my observations were somehow helpful in diffusing the tension, yet it was evident that due to the vicious verbal tirade among a few participants, we couldn’t proceed.

Dinner at the PC Hotel’s ‘Marco Polo’ was perhaps the most refreshing thing about that day, which was almost spoiled by the heated exchange. It featured a contemporary, cosmopolitan menu that united influences from around the world while honouring traditional Lahori favourites. The striking interior design of this

elegant restaurant was distinguished by its floral wood panelling, marbling in midnight brown and deep fuchsia chandeliers. The warring opinions cooled off at the dinner table.



One of the most important lessons for me during the trip was the realisation that Pakistan had changed. Ultra-right groups had gained influence and were not tolerating even minor op-eds and news against their activities in the media. Even in front of my own eyes, a renowned editor from a famous English daily reached out to the Chief Minister of Punjab to help him in seeking forgiveness and mercy from a group against whom he had recently published a news story and was receiving threats against his life.

I also realised that Pakistan had lost so much in the past decade. More than 40,000 people dead and close to \$100 billion financially set aside for the loss of foreign investments due to the onset of militancy and extremism post 9/11 and the War on Terror in Afghanistan.

But even now, no one in Pakistan seemed to have an idea as to whose war the country was fighting. Cities look like cantonments, whereas suicide bombing had become the norm. Markets and public places were haunted by terror and the hotels where I stayed looked like barricaded fortresses.

I recall a story here when, while walking with my friends in Liberty Market, Lahore, I realised that it was time for my afternoon prayers. Upon asking where the mosque was, I was advised either to pray in my hotel room or find a smaller mosque as bigger mosques were constantly targeted by suicide bombers. For me, advice like this in Pakistan shook me and gave me a real sagacity of the psychological trauma common Pakistanis were going through post 9/11.

Terrorists had become so confident in their activities that they were even successful in infiltrating the all-powerful and protected

military headquarters in Rawalpindi in 2009. Their intention was to take Gen Kayani, the then military chief, as hostage and use him as leverage to get their fellows released from jails. It was rumoured that even a renowned extremist was flown from Lahore, in a helicopter, to negotiate with the attackers. But even before he could try, the Special Forces and commandos of the army were successful in thwarting this attack and killed all the attackers.

As the events unfolded and mysteries unravelled, I started realising the real mess that Pakistan had been pushed into over the past decade. I could have never imagined I would ever see such scenes in my lifetime as when I had left, Pakistan was nothing more than a peaceful country with minor political and sectarian rifts.

# Shalom Shalom – Hostility Turns into Hospitality

January 9, 2012 – Every Coin Has Two  
Sides: Journey to Israel

“

*Time is a great teacher, but  
unfortunately it kills all its  
pupils.*

”

Hector Berlioz

*“People say that the issue (Israel-Palestine) is very complicated. Don’t fool yourselves. It is very straight forward,” said Professor Shlaim with a stern face. ‘Israel has occupied Palestinian land and this occupation, which is illegal, is being further consolidated at the cost of innocent Palestinian blood. If Justice still exists in this world in any form, Israel should apologise for its atrocities and vacate Palestinian territory.’ Such words coming from a Jewish professor held the participants spell-bound.”*



As the British Airways flight landed in Tel Aviv from London Heathrow, the door popped open and I stepped out, two destinations etched in my heart – Al Aqsa Mosque and the Wailing Wall. I knew that, whatever the itinerary, I would visit these two places at least. During our trip, one of the members of the group had shared that oft repeated joke: Morris, a tourist, once came to Israel with the intention of visiting the Kotel (Wailing Wall) but he forgot what it was called. When he hired a taxi, he said to the driver, ‘Can you please take me to the place where all Jews cry? Do you know where this is?’ The taxi driver answered, ‘Beseder, I’ll take you there.’ He drove Morris straight to the taxation office and said, ‘This is where the Jews cry.’ The group, and those within hearing distance, broke out into laughter.

When I stepped onto the tarmac at Tel Aviv International Airport, I had an unfathomable feeling. Perhaps it was partly due to the baggage of the history Pakistan shares with Israel (where Israel scores high on the hated list), and I, a British Pakistani, entering the very same country considered to be a taboo. The weather was terribly cold as the temperature in Tel Aviv was almost bordering on zero with strong blustery winds piercing my clothes that made it even worse, as I had left London basking in glorious sunshine that resembled spring more than autumn. My scarf began to lift as a great gust of wind blew. We scurried towards the entrance of the airport.

However, my racing heart started to calm down as we entered the modern airport building. It all looked like business as usual. There were passengers wheeling their luggage and people rushing around. The airport staff were friendly and polite. We had been invited as part of the delegation of the South Side Chamber of Commerce and probably some ‘exclusive’ treatment was meted out to the businessmen travelling there. We were showered with smiles which were quite unusual from immigration staff at an international airport. Having travelled to Europe and South Asia, seeing a smile at the immigration section was rare. Interestingly, there were no heavily armed police patrolling inside the airport compared to the British airports, where military style officers were often seen. Gradually, I noticed the members of my group, mainly British Pakistani businessmen, becoming at ease. Our trip comprised members of the

UK Pakistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the South Side Chamber of Commerce. We were formally invited by the Federation of Chambers of Commerce in Israel for this trip.

However, my presence in the delegation was a strange coincidence. A few years back, I had received a phone call from my younger brother, Tahir from Pakistan. He sounded terribly upset and I could tell over the phone that he was almost out of breath.

Dad is seriously ill. He has given up food, juices and even medicines. He just sits staring at the ceiling for hours and doesn't entertain any communication. When we really tie him down, he whispers 'I want to go to Al-Aqsa Mosque,' said Tahir voicing concern over our dad's failing health.

'Aqsa Mosque?' I repeated his words. I was almost shell shocked. It was evident that Israel and Pakistan did not have any kind of diplomatic relations and regardless of the expenses, visiting the Al-Aqsa Mosque was but an empty dream.

It took me almost two hours over the phone to bring him round. I promised to visit Al-Aqsa Mosque on his behalf. Finally, he agreed to call off his 'hunger strike', believing that I would keep my word.

I put down the phone and thought of the whole scenario. I wondered how and when I could make it. Although my word to my father was only to get him out of his discomfort, deep down I knew that this was one of the hardest promises I had made to someone in my life. But as they say, the universe was conspiring in a different manner, and there I was, in a land which I could never have imagined visiting. My trip was a follow-up of different events that resulted in taking me to Israel.



Meeting Professor Jonathan Story, an International Political Economist from the famous European INSEAD institute was a pleasant experience. Neither had he resembled a typical professor, nor a storyteller. When he turned to shake hands, his taller than six

feet frame filled the entire space with his majestic presence. We were present at *The Future of Business Conference* organised by Fordham University at King's College, London. The conference was inspired by the recent friction between Israel and Turkey which had been hand in glove with each other for several decades but fell out on the issue of the *Freedom flotilla attack* on 31 May 2010. Moreover, the conference also shed light on various events and political developments which could result to friction between both countries. The Gaza flotilla raid was a military operation by Israel against six ships of the *Gaza Freedom Flotilla* in international waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The flotilla, organised by the Free Gaza Movement, the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (İHH) was carrying humanitarian aid and construction materials with the intention of breaking the Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Professor Story was joined by four other experts who spoke at length about the socio-political dynamics of Turkey and Israel. Avi Shlaim, an Iraqi-born British Israeli Jew, a historian, and Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the University of Oxford, was also among the speakers at the conference.

'People say that the issue (Israel-Palestine) is very complicated. Don't fool yourselves. It is very straight forward,' said Professor Shlaim with a stern face. 'Israel has occupied the Palestinian land and this occupation, which is illegal, is being further consolidated at the cost of innocent Palestinian blood. If Justice still exists in this world in any form, Israel should apologise for its atrocities and vacate the Palestinian territory.' Such words coming from a Jewish professor held the participants spell bound.

During the tea break, I had a brief chat with the Professor. With child-like innocence on his face, he was enjoying dipping coconut cookies into his cup of coffee.

'Professor, what gave you this much confidence, courage, and strength to be so blunt and straightforward... don't you think you are entering dangerous territory by making these remarks and offending some people?' I asked.

'Hmmm?' The professor had a pleasant smile on his face. 'You are right. It is Oxford University and Britain that have tolerated me till



now. Had I been in the United States, I may have instantly lost my job.' And yes...' he continued after cordially holding my hand, 'I swear upon Jerusalem, I can't lie. I have spent my childhood over there. If someone passes through those Holy and Sacred streets even once in his life, he can't think about any other place'.

*Jerusalem... Jerusalem...*' it was as if someone was whispering those words in my ear. *Take me to Al Aqsa Mosque...* as if my father was asking me to take him there. I recalled the promise that I made to my father. It was about time to wander in the streets of Jerusalem. This was the first sign, the first hint.



We were walking in the hall of the House of Commons and walking past pictures and statues of previous MPs and Prime Ministers.

'Great Committee Room?' I asked a security guard who was wearing the latest gun across his chest, something which was rare before the 7/7 attacks.

'In that direction sir, follow those two ladies,' he pointed towards the staircase at the end of the hall.

The Great Committee room was a centuries old square room and had a seating capacity for 80 people. All the seats in the room had their own dedicated microphones that were used for Parliamentary committee debates.

We were attending the Palestinian Liberation movement's third memorial week ceremony arranged by the Palestinian Return Centre. Notable faces at the event included Jeremy Corbyn MP, Sir Gerald Kaufman MP, Dr. Mads Gilbert, Lord Andrew Philips, Baroness Jenny Tong, and the Palestinian Ambassador to the UK. The memorial officially kicked off at 6:30 p.m.

A two-minute documentary on the Israel Palestine Wall, built by Israel, initiated the proceedings, and concluded with the message that *the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the century of bringing down walls and together we*

*will also bring down this wall.*

Sir Gerald Kaufman, MP, was the first guest to speak. A man in his seventies, Kaufman was known to be one of the strongest supporters of Palestine in the Western world. During his speech, he criticised the then Israeli aggression towards the Palestinian protestors in Bani Saleh, and also shared the story of a young man who was hit on the head by a tear gas canister and his sister was harassed and insulted afterwards by Israeli forces. It seemed as if his story sent a wave of sorrow through the hall and among the audience.

'Shame! Shame!' shouted some participants in a distinctive English accent.

The next speaker had lost fifteen members of her family in an Israeli attack and used to travel around the world to share the stories of Israeli atrocities in Palestine.

'I am tired now. Thinking about my lost ones makes me exhausted and distressed. But I am carrying on with my journey of telling my story to share with the world that my family members were not just fifteen people – rather they were living human beings, eleven of whom were kids who were supposed to live a full life,' said Amal, whose story brought tears to many eyes.

'I am tired of these mere apologies from the civilised western people. You sit in safe and comfortable London and criticise Israel. It isn't enough. You must get out on to the streets and create awareness in the corridors of power. Remember, it was your country that gave Israel the dagger to stab us, and now it is your duty to take away that dagger. Mere apologies won't work.'

'Shame! Shame!' the hall erupted again with these chants.

MP Jeremy Corbyn, and Baroness Tong also criticised the government and rued the fact that even after several discussions and points of order in the British Parliament, the Government was still unwilling to take up these issues with the Israeli government.

'Useless, stubborn and show-off Osama... hear this... time is out of Israel's hands. The tide is now with the Palestinians. We stand with Palestine. We don't need sympathies. We need concrete actions. You people gave (Menachem) Begin a Nobel Prize, who was a wanted terrorist. Why don't you give a Nobel Prize to Osama?' this was Sir

Gerald, who shocked me with his remarks.

‘People of Britain, we are your representatives. We won’t relax till Palestine gets independence,’ said Jeremy, as he raised his fist in the air, and the hall erupted with claps from all around.

Next was Dr Gilbert, a Norwegian doctor and activist, who had been to Gaza on and off, taking groups of volunteer doctors in his team and providing basic health facilities to the Palestinians. Dr. Gilbert shared heart wrenching stories of the pitiable plight of Palestinians.

Two identical looking people from the audience stood up soon after Gilbert’s speech and started heckling.

‘You people are spreading terror against Israel. Stop making heroes out of Palestinians. Have you forgotten that Colonel Richard Kemp called Israel’s army the biggest moral force in the world? Did you forget the fact that the same Palestinians fired 50,000 rockets at us?’ shouted one of the hecklers.

‘Yes, 50,000 rockets, which only killed thirteen Israeli soldiers, out of which five were victims of friendly fire. But you guys killed 2000 Palestinians in retaliation. What kind of a war is this in which only the innocent people on one side are dying? The Colonel is a liar. With the same lies, you people attacked Iraq. Remember? The time is near for an independent Palestine. Insha Allah,’ responded Dr Gilbert, after which, again, most of the people in the audience started clapping and this thumping applause overcame the shouts of the Israeli hecklers.

Soon afterwards, an elderly man stood up, wearing a Jewish cap.

‘I am a representative of the anti-Zionist Jew association. You (the Israeli state) cannot cover your crimes under the garb of religion, holocaust, or the chosen people of God. You have to face up to and answer the crying voices coming out of Palestine!’ the Jewish man shouted and received vigorous applause.

‘Jonathan,’ said a girl from the audience, who was apparently talking to one of the hecklers, ‘I even know your name as you go to every Palestinian ceremony just to spoil it. I am twenty-one years old, and you look close to sixty. I just want to ask for how long will you seek vengeance for the enmity going back thousands of years? Let’s think about our future generations and work towards harmony. If

Britain can accommodate both of us, then the Holy Land has far more space.'

The apparently defeated heckler couldn't stand this situation and left the hall.

'I am leading a convoy of two hundred people with me. We have eighty Jews as well. Let's see who bombs us now,' Amal announced.

I felt as if Palestine had won the case for its independence. I also realised that my visit to Jerusalem was now certain, and this seminar was another sign for me.



When the invitation for Israel finally arrived, I couldn't believe my eyes.

We had gathered at a reception hosted by the leaders of the British Muslim community. Members of the Pakistan UK Chamber of Commerce and Industry and others were busy chatting on several topics.

'Would you like to join me on our trip to Jerusalem?' asked a humble and polite sounding Ikram Khan, who had established his name in the British business community.

'Jerusalem?' I asked in surprise.

'I was making plans with the South Side Chamber of Commerce which was invited by the Israeli Federation of Chambers of Commerce to visit. He wants to take along some Pakistani businessmen as well. After meeting you, I thought that you could be the best person and representative to join us. Mr. Qureshi, you will join me, right?' asked Ikram.

Without thinking, I said 'Of course. Why wouldn't I?' At the same moment, I told myself, *what else is an invitation?*

I knew that I was finally able to fulfil the promise that I had made to my father. There were tears in my eyes.



Our next few days in Israel were chaotic and rumbustious. We had been travelling, attending meetings, speaking at receptions, engaging in discussions, and waiting for the most coveted moment of the trip; offering Friday prayers at Al-Aqsa Mosque – one of the three holiest places in Islam.

As we spent more time in Israel, more myths were being shattered. Israel was not the garrison state it was branded as in the media. There was no scary atmosphere, no gun-toting policemen and no siren-blazing police cars racing around, which were so common in London. Most surprisingly, the Israeli chefs at the Grand Beech Hotel in Tel Aviv, when they figured out my Pakistani roots, knew how to prepare the big spicy mother of omelettes for a hectic day ahead. I found out that Zionism had a separate existence from Judaism when two orthodox Jews criticised Israeli atrocities on my flight from London to Tel Aviv.

I was also exasperated when I heard from a senior retired air force officer, 'While America blundered by creating the Jihadi industry in Afghanistan and Pakistan by spawning Al Qaeda, Israelis floundered by creating Hamas against Al-Fatah of Yasser Arafat.'

I met Israeli businessmen who complained about Israel's isolation in the global fraternity due to its Zionist ideology. The biggest of all surprises was around 1,500 Israelis taking to the streets on 11 January to protest at what they saw as institutionalised discrimination against Ethiopian immigrant Jews. The protestors joined politicians, NGOs, and activists outside Parliament in Jerusalem to demonstrate for an end to racism. The young protestors, some with faces painted half black and half white, carried signs reading, *A NEW GENERATION DEMANDS CHANGE,* and *'I'M BLACK AND I'M PROUD.'* This latest demonstration was sparked by reports that Kiryat Malachi landlords refused to rent or sell their properties to Ethiopian Jews.

As we were the guests of the Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce and Industry, we were given a presentation on the

accelerated growth of Israel's economy. This overview took one part of my mind back to Pakistan because of their founding and ideological histories, which I was comparing with Israel's recent development. Being the 41<sup>st</sup> largest economy in the world, Israel also ranks 24<sup>th</sup> among the world's most economically developed nations, according to the International Institute for Management Development's World Competitiveness Yearbook rankings – a ranking in which Pakistan does not even make the top 60. Whereas Israel stands 19<sup>th</sup> on the list of countries on the High Human Development Index (HDI), Pakistan stands at 146<sup>th</sup>. In terms of poverty levels, more than 21% of Pakistan's population lives below the poverty line according to UNDP's poverty index, whereas Israel is not even on the list due to its high living standards. In terms of democratic growth and civil supremacy, Israel has had prolonged periods of civil rule, contrary to Pakistan's multiple stints of martial law. These comparisons took me back to the past when we were once respected globally as a progressive and embryonic nation, and countries like Malaysia and South Korea emulated our five-year development plans during the sixties.

The Israeli economy depends on imported crude oil, grains, raw materials, and military equipment. Cut diamonds, high-technology equipment and agricultural products are the leading exports. When Israel runs physical trade deficits, they are covered by tourism and other service exports as well as significant foreign investment inflows. The global financial crisis of 2008-09 caused a brief recession in Israel but the economy showed resilience and entered the crisis with solid fundamentals, following years of prudent fiscal policies and a sound banking sector. Not surprisingly, the economy has recovered better than most advanced and comparable sized economies.

In 2010, Israel formally acceded to the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development. Natural gas fields discovered off Israel's coast during the past two years have brightened its energy capital outlook with the Leviathan field, one of the world's largest offshore natural gas finds of the past decade.

Israel is a world leader in software, telecommunications, and semiconductors development. The concentration of high-tech

industries in Israel, which are backed by a strong venture capital industry, gave it the nickname *Silicon Wadi*, which, in global importance, is considered second only to its Californian counterpart.

We were also apprised by an Israeli businessman that the leading Israeli manufacturer of tankers, aircraft re-fuelling, fire-fighting trucks, armoured vehicles and special purpose trailers, Hatehof Ltd., provides Pakistan's Air Force with military equipment under a clandestine contract through Turkey, which was also used in the much-acclaimed JF-17 Thunder Aircraft. Israeli Press Television also aired a similar broadcast about the deal which goes against the common narrative and state policies in Pakistan, where people consider Israel to be a part of every conspiracy against the country.

Israel's global dominance in high tech industry, including the manufacture of computer processors (Intel), Kindle eBook readers and semiconductors, provide it with a cutting edge in eavesdropping endeavours as well. Even longstanding friends, including the United States, have been irked by the Israeli secret service that Mossad accesses in this area. There were rumbles amongst certain people that EU leaders' countries' communications were also being tapped. The American journalist and writer, James Bamford, made several accusations in his book, *The Shadow Factory: The Ultra-Secret National Security Agency (NSA) from 9/11 to the Eavesdropping on America*, which came out in the United States in 2008. As a former producer for the ABC television network, Bamford spent around three decades writing about the NSA. It was one of the most important, yet least-known American intelligence agencies. Bamford claimed that eighty per cent of all American telephone transmissions were conducted by means of Israeli companies' technology, know-how and accessibility. Thus, Bamford believed that the American intelligence community was exposing itself to the risk that Israeli companies would access its most secret and sensitive digital information. He further claimed that Israeli companies had been largely established by graduates known as the *Unit 8200*, and therefore were connected by their umbilical cords to Israeli intelligence and through their CEOs and Boards of Directors.

As the trip was organised from a business perspective, we missed the chance to visit Palestinian areas, particularly the Gaza Strip.

When I compared the developed State of Israel with the underprivileged areas of Palestinian territory, Israelis claimed that they had handed over the control to Palestinian authorities who wanted to keep the area as it was to showcase their misery. They also blamed rampant corruption within the Palestinian authority as another reason for poverty and backwardness. However, the construction of the wall to isolate Palestinian areas from Israel did raise questions as an act of raising barriers in the 21st century, in which humanity claimed to have come a long way since the demolition of the Berlin Wall.

I kept roaming in Jerusalem in the Keffiyeh – the traditional Arab headdress fashioned from a square cotton scarf made popular by Yasser Arafat. Past the Wailing Wall, I saw two fully armed Israeli soldiers in the alert position for the first time and stopped there for a memento. The photograph shows the three faces cracking in wide grins with gun barrels pointing down to the ground: a weird mix of guns and roses! I recalled the plea of a Palestinian girl who shouted in the House of Commons, 'Jonathan, let's stop fighting over the Holy Land! If the British land can be generous enough to feed me and you, the Holy Land is much more generous than that.'

The game of guns and roses goes on.

## **Jerusalem – Hostility turns into hospitality.**

One morning, in 2014, I received an abrupt call from Reverend Rana Khan, inviting me to join the Diocese of Southwark for a programme in the Holy Land, Jerusalem. Unfortunately, the timing of this trip clashed with my other commitments at that time when I received an email for the same programme in 2016. I was spurred on to make my initial visit to the Holy Land when my father urged me to take the trip. I felt it only right to ask Umar to do the same – one could call it a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Having cleared much of his work schedule, he decided to join the programme. We received letters of support from the Archbishops of Jerusalem and Canterbury as part of the trip.



What an exciting trip it was, going from London to the Holy Land! Exciting for two reasons: 1) spiritually, because of the visit to Holy places for the three Abrahamic faiths with Bishop Dr. Richard Cheetham of Diocese of Southwark and Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra of the Muslim Council of Britain, and 2) to attend a multi-faith programme at St. George's College Jerusalem, an historical and prestigious Anglican academic institution.

St George's College, Jerusalem was established in 1920 and offers its services to communities of diverse backgrounds as an international centre for continuing education, interfaith encounter, pilgrimage, etc. It welcomes people of all faiths to come and share their programmes.

At Terminal 5 of Heathrow Airport, we were ushered forward by British Airways staff. A bus was waiting for us. Most of our fellow passengers expressed annoyance as they realised that, after a long walk to the departure gate lifts, and a train ride, there was still a bus journey before we boarded the plane for Israel.

My seat was next to an orthodox Jew, wearing his long black coat and black hat. Umar sat across from us, sending as many emails as he could before taking off. The Jewish man asked Umar about the results of the debate between Bernie Sanders and Hilary Clinton, as well as Donald Trump and Ted Cruz. Umar quickly checked online and passed his phone to Aaron to check. He checked the results and claimed that Trump would win the Republican candidacy, even though he was an idiot. He distrusted Hillary Clinton, saying that she had a bad track record and America needed someone new and fresh, although Trump was not the option for replacement.

I responded, 'Trump! I think Americans are looking for serious change. A 'black' president in the 'White' House... this time a populist President might just be in the White House. He has very strong support from a section of the Jewish community – after all, his daughter has converted to Judaism. I worry that his lack of experience and the reactive behaviour we've seen will not do the world any good.'

Our conversation continued until we were inside the plane. The most revealing aspect in the aeroplane was that the needs of the Jewish passengers were catered for first. They were the first to be

given food (kosher) on the plane to ensure that there was no mixing with other food; everybody else followed. The requests of orthodox Jews not to be seated next to women were also accommodated.

The group's excitement at disembarking from the plane and being so close to Jerusalem proved to be short-lived when one of our group members, Sughra, from the Woolfe Institute of Cambridge University, was stopped by immigration. Another member, Asif, who also happened to be a City of London police officer, had his passport taken and he, too, joined Sughra in the waiting area for further investigation. Disappointed that our members were going to be interrogated, Bishop Cheetham, Umar and I walked up to the Immigration Officer at the desk together, showing him our passports, invitation letters, itineraries, and letters of support from the Archbishops of Canterbury and Jerusalem. Unfortunately, Umar was also held by the Immigration staff. None of them had come across this kind of hostility, hence unrest and frustration were obvious. I reminded them of the duty of Immigration staff, which is to ensure the security of their borders, particularly in view of the recent terrorist incidents. Sir Iqbal Sacranie, on the same flight as us, was also stopped for further checks. Umar, who always exudes confidence and has self-assurance about taking on any task, just shook his head in disappointment and walked on with a *what can you do?* kind of look. His mantra has always been three words: *Let it go*. Owing to overlapping discussions that ensued, the questions that were asked of them, the hostility of the security officers, the intensity of the questioning, the general mood was very dismal. At that time, we had effective moral support from Shaykh Ibrahim and Bishop Cheetham, as they stayed there throughout the ordeal. We sat in the waiting area as more and more people joined us. Undoubtedly, the others were also very confident; hence eventually everyone successfully answered their questions and re-joined us.

Bishop Richard then said something quite profound, which one can deeply appreciate coming from the UK. 'When we get to St George's College, you will see that the hostility will turn into hospitality and St George's will be like an Oasis'.

After several hours, when the ordeal was over, we walked through the immigration gates and were greeted by cheers from the

group. We received a very warm welcome from Mr. Bishara Khoury, also known as George, an Arab Christian, and the Operations & Logistics officer at St George's College. They welcomed us and apologised for the obstacles created by the Israeli Immigration staff. We boarded the coach in the evening and drove off to the 'Oasis' that offered us unique hospitality.

The warm welcome by Gregory C. Jenks, Dean, St. George's College, made us feel at home. We got the feeling we were visiting our family.

There are several common rooms as well as a lecture room with a huge library. Daily worship and prayer can take place in St. George's intimate college chapel, and at the Cathedral of St. George for bigger gatherings.

The awe-inspiring atmosphere at St. George's College was one of hospitality; a highly trained College chef served an excellent daily cuisine, of top quality. The programme provided us with an opportunity to share tremendous knowledge during meals, teatime, site visits, and services of worship.

## **Tranquillity at Masjid al Aqsa and the Wailing Wall for the Worshippers**

As the sun rose, its bright rays shone into my room to wake me up. I prepared myself in anticipation. Although I had visited Al-Aqsa Mosque once before, the opportunity of being able to lay eyes on it and pray there once again was enticing. As the third holiest site after the Al-Haram Mosque in Makkah and the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah in Islam, it holds an incredibly special place in the heart of all Muslims. As ever, my late father's words persuading me to visit here echoed. In every corner, people were reciting the Quran or engaged in other prayers. Men, women and children of various nationalities and colour were coming in groups to offer prayers in the mosque.

We visited the Wailing Wall to understand and 'walk in the shoes' of our Jewish brethren. The sun was beating down and those standing by the Wailing Wall were lost in their prayers, eyes very

tightly closed with intense devotion as they rocked back and forth, some more than others, some more devoted than others.

*The wall is high and extends for a good length. It is separated at the ground with a six-foot wooden wall to separate men and women; men pray on the left side of the wall and women on the right. All men, whether Jewish or non-Jewish are required to cover their heads – provision is made for those who do not have anything with which to cover their heads and are to wear kippahs. Women are not given the right to read the Torah at the wall and religious police arrest women who do not follow these rules.*

I was lured by a conversation taking place between an American orthodox Jew, Yerachmiel, and two of my group members, Dave and Manzoor. As Yerachmiel and I conversed, I learned that he had travelled around the world, including Pakistan and Japan. Although born a Jew, he travelled in the hope of finding a true religion, converting to Buddhism and Christianity along the way. After checking these religions, he returned to Israel to see whether the religion he had run away from was the one for him. He moved back to Israel after converting back to Judaism. We debated on who the land belonged to and whether Palestinians should live here. The basis of his argument was that the Quran mentions Israel and that it talks of the children of Israel and therefore Muslims should relinquish Israel. The second part of the argument was that he could no longer recognise which Palestinians were dangerous and which were not – therefore, they should all be removed. Dismayed by this view, I moved on to speak to other Jews who were around and found that they expressed mixed views.

One could clearly sense intolerance and rejection of Palestinians by parts of the Jewish community. One would have hoped that after experiencing something as horrible as the Holocaust, the Jewish community would be against ethnic cleansing and mass removal of local people. However, in a news report around the same time, I had read that one in five Israelis believed in ethnic cleansing or worse. Sad news, indeed.

I once observed a young Jewish boy walking down the slope leading to the Wailing Wall. He was smoking and walking with an attitude when a security guard scolded him for being disrespectful to the holy place. He was moved away from the slope and told to

finish his cigarette before coming back.

Initially, we had only a Muslim group which wanted to walk up towards the Mosque. Later, however, some of our Christian friends also wanted to come along. As we walked on, Asif was stopped by the security guards who were checking his passport and visa. We passed several alleys with small shops dotted around. The ancient and time-honoured footpath and walls took you back through centuries and one felt as if one was walking through them at the time of Jesus Christ (peace be upon him). Unfortunately, as we arrived at the entrance, the guards told us that only Muslims are allowed to enter and see the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The disappointment on Dave's face said it all. Suddenly, I remembered my discussion with Bishara on this very issue and the background to the new rules. A Jewish doctor once walked into Masjid Al Aqsa and opened fire on the Muslims in the mosque as they prayed. Twenty innocent people died that day and hundreds more were injured because of a psychotic man. His actions reverberated throughout Palestine; the murder of so many people resulted in violence throughout the country. Consequently, regulations were changed, allowing only Muslims to enter the sacred ground. The only exceptions to this rule were guided tours approved by the Waqf (Trust) Management itself.

Reluctantly leaving our Christian friends behind, we entered the mosque through huge green gates, guarded by armed Israeli soldiers. At entry point, they asked us if we were Muslim, testing us by reciting a small line from the Quran and asking Lamine to complete the rest. Majestic trees bowed down in reverence to the sacred building that lay ahead. It was a grey and cloudy day, and the wind blew the clouds to shield the sun from time to time. It was about five minutes' walk from the gate to the actual Al-Aqsa Mosque itself. We could see the tip of the Dome of the Rock. As we reached the top of the stairs, the sun shone down over the Dome and its surrounding area. The sight was truly majestic as the Dome glistened and the reflecting light blinded us for a second.

Blue, green, gold, and white tiles, fashioned in a mosaic, clothed the top half of the outer walls of the Dome of the Rock. Large white stones, which looked like marble, covered the bottom half of the outer walls. The four entrances to the building were accessed under porch

style wooden roofs.

To the right were white stairs leading downwards. Large, white stone archways stood tall at the beginning of the steps. Through the archways we beheld the grey-black dome of Al-Aqsa Mosque. People hurried towards the entrance to get to the first row of prayer. From a distance, one could see the huge open door and a red carpet.

I received huge attention and respect when I met with the Imam of the mosque, Sheikh Waleed Siam, and told him that I was from the Qureshi Al-Hashmi family. The Hashemites from Jordan are the official custodians of the Al Aqsa Mosque. We discussed several issues such as everyday attendees, security etc.

**Monday, 14 March 2015**

## **Persecution of Arabs is Leading to a City of Ghosts – A story of fear and hope**

In the morning we were ready to go to Hebron. Unfortunately, there had been an incident in the early hours of the morning which meant that there could be a security issue for the group. We were informed by the St George's management that the Israeli military had shut down the area in the meantime and so our trip to Hebron was cancelled. We travelled instead to the high mountains of Jericho for a spot of history.

After a short break back at the College, we walked across to St George's School (managed by the Anglican Church) to speak to Palestinian Christian and Muslim school children and teachers. The students were in Years 10 and 11 and looked like modern, cool dudes, as any British children would. Modern haircuts and foreign fashion sense really gave these young Palestinians a unique look. They were into things that my own children enjoyed; they liked football, music, and shopping. We met with the Vice Principal of the School, Susan Khayo – a Palestinian Christian.

I spoke to one of the students and he gave a harrowing account of being in Palestine:

'I call Jerusalem the City of Ghosts. This is because the children

are forced to be home by 6pm for security reasons. We don't know what the Israeli forces will do to us. Because of this, we cannot take part in extra-curricular activities. We have to restrict ourselves in what we do, which is unfair. Our CV's are not presentable for higher studies, etc. We feel suffocated, and we can't breathe here. The army and the settlers pick on us – we are children, and they are adults. We can be killed at any time.'

It begged the question that if my children were living in such a hostile and volatile environment, what psychological states of mind would they be in?

Another Year 10 student jumped in: 'We can only hang around in the streets doing nothing. We have no parks and there are no-go areas. We cannot go to the West Bank because it takes half a day and there are checks where we can be delayed. We can't contribute to society or have fun; it makes us depressed. We feel that there is no escape from here.'

Another student of Year 11 added to the discussion, 'We are living in fear all the time; the last few years have been particularly bad. We cannot go anywhere out of fear – we once went to Rumala and went through fine, but on our way back we were stopped for checks, causing worry to our parents. I was six hours late and everyone was scared.'

Speaking about the Hebron incident in the morning that resulted in cancellation of our trip, they said that they may be in danger because a Palestinian was killed. The people locked their doors and shut the windows.

One of the students said, 'You cannot run when there is an incident because the Israeli army suspects that you are running to hide something from them. Once, a young boy of my age ran after some shooting took place because he was scared, and he was shot fifty times by soldiers, even though he was innocent.'

Another student added, 'There was another situation where a student was shot because he had his hands in his pockets and the soldiers suspected that he was going to attack them. We cannot walk in the streets with our hands in our pockets and we are told not to look into the eyes of Israelis, otherwise we are called arrogant, and this is tantamount to provoking a response.'

He was visibly upset – one could see the passion in his eyes. Here, I am thinking what this despair will bring to society. What kind of society are we developing here – a society with a hateful mindset?

Then he dropped the proverbial bombshell on us. He said that school children as young as fifteen and sixteen were being arrested by the Israeli police.

‘My friends are arrested for liking a Free Palestine page on Facebook or sharing a video. The law is that you can only go to prison if you are over eighteen, but they were not.’

I wondered whether the Israelis were unknowingly embarking upon a journey of their complete isolation. The world has become a global village and means of communication are so readily available that news spreads in seconds, with videos and infographics becoming viral in minutes.

Susan qualified some of the points made. ‘We do not let our children leave the school without their parents. We do not want them to be alone in the streets after school because they could end up being shot.’

Umar asked Susan what the school did to help their students.

‘We cannot do anything. We support them as much as we can, but they (Israeli Government) don’t listen to us at all! They are released after some time and put under house arrest for a week... they cannot even come to school.’

I suggested the Israeli government should introduce a Ministry of Peace where institutions such as St. Georges could have access to dialogue to bring peace by discussing such issues and finding real community-led solutions, as we had in Northern Ireland.

I have seen a lot of suffering in the past. My visit to All Saints Church (Peshawar, Pakistan) after an explosion there left one man and eleven members of his family dead. But this was a lot to take in. Even for me. I could feel my heart sinking.

I began to analyse the situation that these young Christians and Muslims were describing. Living under such stress and fear all the time, what mental development would they undergo, and what positive contribution could society really expect from them?

A brilliant student was rattled by the discussion. As a leader of this group, he shared his perspective with us, too.



‘The media plays an important role in this illegal occupation by Israel. Unfortunately, they portray us Palestinians as criminals or terrorists. But they won’t tell you that for every five Israeli deaths, about one hundred Palestinians are murdered in cold blood. They justify the deaths of children, women, elderly men, disabled, and others in the name of ‘security’, but this apartheid government has broken international laws without accountability. The streets flow with the blood of Palestinians. We live for Palestine, and it is in our souls. But we will succeed, persevere, and become assets for our country to challenge the illegal occupation at the UN. I want to study politics and law at Cambridge University so that when I come back, I can join my government and raise these issues. All my friends are the same and just need the opportunity.’

I was so moved by this sheer resilience from the youth. My mind wandered off... *What can we, as British people, do to bring peace among these communities? What influence can the religious leadership have with the parties involved? Can we knock on the doors of international institutions and remind them of their responsibilities to defuse this ticking bomb? Is the two-state solution viable and a way forward with the people feeling this way?* So many ideas were coming to my mind. The 100-year anniversary of the Balfour Declaration was fast approaching and perhaps this was the time when international leadership, particularly Britain, could play a leading role to help both sides to work on common ground and implement the Balfour Declaration. Israel’s right to exist would be legitimised through the clear acceptance of the Balfour Declaration and take them out of the negative portrayal that was causing isolation. Perhaps it was the right time for the Muslim world to reconsider its position towards Israel. It may be that Pakistan, being a nuclear power and an important ally for the US and Saudi Arabia, could play a constructive role in nudging things in the right direction.

The silver lining was that most of the students looked to the future and saw it as being bright. They wanted to study at Cambridge University (UK), Oxford University (UK), Harvard (US) and Yale (US). They wanted to study philosophy, politics, international law, and business. What could I do to help these youngsters? I gave them an opportunity. A scholarship fund to be set up at the School of Economics and Law (SOEL) for Christian, Muslim and Jewish

children studying together. A chance to get a holistic view of British education and democracy and get back to help Palestinians. Susan and the students were grateful, and we hoped to follow up on our support soon.

My generation has been stuck in an old mindset that has not been fruitful for either side. Both live in fear and both question their future. The future generation, these young men, including Israeli Jews and expat Jews, are already protesting in their thousands against the status quo. With the right experiences and opportunities, future generations could lead to a two-state solution. Where possible, and given the numerous issues, the scholarship fund could be useful.

## **The forgotten people of Palestine**

We were given another memorable welcome in St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem by an old friend, Canon David Longe. A comrade from Stockwell and one of our closest allies in tackling gang crime to promote social cohesion, he was now Chaplain at the Cathedral in Jerusalem. He had represented the Christian community on several issues, including a serious incident involving a gang shooting opposite the Stockwell Green Muslim Centre. A five-year-old girl and her father were shot. We stood together in solidarity to show our community's resolve.

The Archbishop of Jerusalem, the Most Revd. Suheil Dawani and his wife, Shafeeqa Fu'ad Massad, arranged a welcome party at their official residence. The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem covered Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

After a lengthy discussion on the current state of Palestinian affairs from a religious and interfaith standpoint, it became clear that religion and interfaith dialogue should be used for the solution, rather than being abused and used to fuel the fire of discontent in Palestine. My question to Archbishop Dawani was to what extent are Christians being persecuted in Palestine and how can we help, in the UK and elsewhere, to resolve this issue?

He mentioned that Christians are the forgotten people of Palestine, even in the West.

‘Nobody is aware of our suffering. The media is ignoring us. People like you can help by going back to the UK and raising awareness of the fact that this is not a Muslim-Jewish issue only; it is an Israel-Palestine political issue, not a religious one. We are part of this society and culture. We Christians are also Palestinian, and important stakeholders. Even our own Western churches ask us when we converted to Christianity, but I must tell them that we have always been Christians, and we have always been here. So, the best thing you can do for us is to raise awareness’, he said.

It was a real surprise to hear him say that western Christians were unaware of the problems Christians are facing in Palestine. There is huge media coverage of Christians suffering in areas such as Syria and Iraq with the current rise of DAESH, but not the same coverage for the persecution of Christians in Israel. In 2016, the United Nations declared Israel the top human rights violator.

Likening the situation to Pakistan and India, where trade was being used to defuse tension, the question was posed to Archbishop Dawani as to what else could be used to bring the parties together. In response thereto, the Archbishop Dawani focused his attention on music, saying that the two shared the same music and it could be used to bring harmony.

Agreeing with the suggestion that trade could be used, he said, ‘Trade would be one of the best methods, since business relations are currently ongoing.’ He apprised us that those business meetings between Palestinian and Israeli businessmen even take place in Rumala, despite the obvious issue of hostility. Business brings people together because there is a common interest in prosperity. A Jewish musician, who believed in the Palestinian cause and state, played with Palestinian musicians. Israeli and Palestinian youth musicians performing together to build critical understanding and to develop creative non-violent tools, may be a future project for social change.’

Perhaps trade could be promoted by the UK Trade and Investment arm of the Government in collaboration with chambers of commerce, particularly supported by the tourism department.

# The Role of Education in Addressing Extremism 2009

“

*Alone we can do so little; together  
we can do so much.*

”

Helen Keller

*“During the conference, I emphasised the role that education can play in supporting students to step in and benefit from shared values. Our shared values, which bind communities together, belong to everyone in Britain; they are not possessed by any one race, faith/belief, or nationality. With higher education, they can be experienced, not taught, and built over time by people sharing ideas, accepting others’ views and having constructive debates which can lead to agreement or disagreement. As the next generation is to become the leader of tomorrow, it was important for their critical thinking, developed at educational institutions, to be positive.”*



The Conference was held in London and had participants from different walks of life. The purpose of this initiative was to highlight the scourge of far-right extremism since it had been long overlooked by authorities and communities. The second strand of this conference was to provide a unique opportunity to discuss the role of education/educational institutions as a tool in tackling and preventing violent extremism globally. Its objectives included: exposing rapid increase of religious and far right extremism amongst the youth in particular; identifying the contributions academic institutions can make in providing a framework in tackling extremism; creating awareness and understanding within communities and academic institutions about the causes and consequences of extremism; providing government with an insight to the important role education can play in addressing violent extremism; encouraging communities to take ownership of the problem; proposing a network between educational establishments and socio-religious bodies through workshops; and sharing good practices and research into the phenomenon.

The first workshop, *Educational Institutions and Extremism*, was facilitated by Professor Alan Johnson of Edgehill University, and the scope of the discussion was to examine the effects, causes and consequences of extremism on educational institutions and vice versa.

It was a lively workshop where some opined that people who are in university are at that stage in their lives when they are forming their identities, which makes them quite vulnerable to extremist influences.

It was agreed that extremism has multiple factors, and radicalisation on campus is only one factor, though an important one. A small number of students could be vulnerable to radicalisation as they were away from parental authority for the first time, perhaps unsure of their identity, tackling demands of different cultures, questing for knowledge, or meaning and purpose, and coming into contact with extremist influences.

Several participants pointed out that it was important for universities not to bury their heads in the sand but to work closely with student organisations, parents, and with local community

organisations to help their students through what may be a tough time. Perhaps a more pro-active approach was needed and engaging with students was important for this. Participants also raised the point quite strongly that Government institutions were placing too much emphasis on religious extremism and were not focusing enough on far-right extremism, which was on the rise. The impact of not tackling far right extremism would be the boost to far-right political groups in elections. We discussed the possibility of organising a range of seminars by experienced organisations, such as Stockwell Green Community Services and others, to engage in outreach work, so that campuses did not become spaces where extremist ideas were uncontested.

The second workshop, *Educational Institutions and the Third sector – A Practical Dialogue*, was facilitated by Dr. Sarah Marsden and Dr. Bill Thomson from the University of St. Andrews, along with Liz Dixon of London Probation.

The role of education in addressing extremism in this context was multiple:

1. It provided a practical incentive for engaging individuals in the project.
2. It gave practical skills to encourage beneficiaries to try and move into employment or further training and away from crime and extremism.
3. It acted to increase self-esteem and self-respect.
4. It provided a regular platform for engagement with the centre so that the mentoring relationship could develop, and trust could be established.
5. It gave beneficiaries a point of reference, and somewhere safe to go if they needed advice or help.
6. It provided a place where they could learn about religion from qualified scholars and address those issues that concerned them in a non-judgemental environment.
7. It could raise awareness amongst political parties that they were disconnected from the youth and that they were creating spaces for the far-right extremist groups,

such as the National Front and the British National Party, to grow and attract them.

Several themes emerged following the discussions with the delegates to the conference.

1. Religious extremism from radical groups was currently one of the major threats. Yet, right-wing violent extremism was experiencing mushroom growth and needed to be tackled proactively.
2. When engaging with individuals at risk, it was important that those involved had credibility with the service users; this raised obvious problems for state agencies such as the Police and Probation Services or third sector groups with political links.
3. Several ways for developing this credibility were discussed:
  - a. State actors getting involved at local level, for example going to community gatherings, meeting with members of the community, and setting up joint programmes.
  - b. Building relations through activity-based events such as five-a-side football, with one team from the police, and another from the youth or community.
  - c. Trips away, such as those organised by the Active Change Foundation where the background of those from e.g., the police, were kept anonymous until group activities had been undertaken, allowing a personal relationship to develop before discussion on topics of extremism and violence.
  - d. Cooperation between government institutions and organisations such as SGCS in arranging seminars and conferences to raise awareness.



4. The taboo nature of the subject of extremism was also discussed as problematic when trying to engage organisations to address the issue. There was a need for a safe space to discuss issues of concern, which people felt they could not achieve without being labelled as extremists.
5. The importance of listening to young people and respecting their views was emphasised. For example, by asking what activities and routes to engagement they would like to have. Additionally, their views should be taken seriously, and given credibility rather than being ignored.
6. The importance of stories and personal interactions among individuals from different groups was considered immensely important. It provided a unique opportunity to listen to the other person's point of view in a human light by personalising it and increased the probability of changing attitudes.

Throughout the conference, one thing was evident: those on the extreme side who were displaying discriminatory views, had rarely met someone from another faith and therefore could not identify with them in any way. One example of this was a meeting where members of the community, the police and other agencies came together to hear the stories of two persons affected by violent extremism: a relative of someone who died in the 9/11 attacks, and a relative of another who was killed on 7/7. This was seen to really work to engage people and change ideas and attitudes.

7. An end note of the workshop was the importance of providing platforms, both formal and informal, to allow individuals from diverse backgrounds, both religious and far right groups, to get in touch with one another and hear their points of view, and personal stories. This was considered as the greatest opportunity of changing

negative attitudes, promoting cohesion, and developing understanding between different parties.

During the conference, I emphasised the role that education can play in supporting students to step in and benefit from shared values. Our shared values, which bind communities together, belong to everyone in Britain; they are not possessed by any one race, faith/belief, or nationality. With higher education, they can be experienced, not taught, and built over time by people sharing ideas, accepting others' views, and having constructive debates which can lead to agreement or disagreement. As the next generation is to become the leader of tomorrow, it was important for their critical thinking, developed at educational institutions, to be positive.

Educated persons can play more of a leadership role in their families, workplaces, and communities in the long run. Because of this, it is critical that higher education institutions (HEIs) embody these values of openness, free debate, tolerance, and acceptance; and promote them through the ways they operate.

By promoting this culture of community cohesion, we will provide an environment with the trust and respect through which communities can deal more productively and collaboratively with any conflict arising from differences of culture, ideology, or faith. There is a particular opportunity for HEIs, because they are often at the heart of the communities they serve, to shape the debate and guide productive discussions. As the Vice Chancellor of a public sector university in Pakistan once said to me, 'How can the government ask us to monitor free speech? Our job is to open the minds of our students and think radically!' Rather than taking this through a negative lens, it should be nurtured and directed into positive avenues.

'While we have seen a major impetus by the Labour government to engage with grassroots level community organisations to encourage participation of Muslim communities, I must urge the government not to forget or lose focus on the non-BME communities who are being exploited by far-right extremist groups. My worry is that the far right is becoming a populist movement and will result in a wave of political ideology infiltrating democracy. Consequently, the

system is creating a polarised community and the political parties need to grab the bull by its horns to introduce programmes and initiatives for depolarisation. I have seen a steady increase in faith and race-based attacks, with members of the community saying that children and women are being targeted. Jewish and Muslim graveyards, places of worship and important places are being desecrated.'

Kate Hoey, MP, first discussed the issue of community cohesion and integration in relation to combating extremism and highlighted communities and local authorities should work together. She praised Stockwell Green Muslim Centre for being central to connecting the Muslim community with the local authorities. She cited the example of one issue in Lambeth, that of a shortage of burial spaces for Muslim communities, being resolved through Lambeth council working closely with the Muslim community there, and within a short while, a large tract of land was allocated.

She then ventured into education more specifically, and the role of educational institutions. She made it clear that it was the responsibility of all schools to play their part in ensuring that children were taught the value of a community. She expressed support for faith schools and said that there was no significant difference between state schools and faith schools. She referred to the case of IQRA School, which was recently accepted as a formal faith school. She mentioned that the rights of parents had existed since the 1940's to be able to send their children to faith schools. She urged the heads of schools to teach their pupils how to be a part of a wider society and community, a citizen of the country, and that the current initiatives in some areas for the twinning of faith schools and state schools were very good in allowing a mixing of children from different backgrounds. This would remove any limitations that might be felt by critics of faith schools.

She mentioned that the 2012 Olympic games were just a few years away and that this was a chance to leave a legacy, but that there should also be continuity where the opportunities of sports from the major Olympics were extended at the grass roots level, which could instil within young people the highest level of aspirations possible to achieve and want to enter higher education. This being a

recognition that low aspirations, unemployment and educational attainment were causes of extremism, be it far right groups or religions. She summarised that in the last twenty years, a lot had been done but there was a lot more that needed to be done and community groups like SGCS were the way forward in terms of empowering young people and building their aspirations.

Professor Alan Johnson of Edge Hill University shared a historical aspect with the participants, encompassing the methodologies used by Jewish sufferers of the Nazis. He explained that the Auschwitz survivor, Primo Levi, gave over 130 talks to schoolchildren in post-war Italy, and his books of testimony, *If This is a Man* and *The Truce*, became part of the Italian school curriculum.

Talking to the youngsters about the causes and consequences of extremism became Levi's 'third profession' effectively, after chemistry and writing. Professor Johnson's talk explored what we can learn from Levi's experience. Levi felt that the miseducation of German youth, and not just by the schools, had been one of the main reasons for the rise of the extremism that was Nazism. As education goes, so goes the society.

Levi would tell the children stories – of warning and of hope, of perpetrators and of rescuers – drawn from his experiences during the Holocaust. Professor Johnson drew out the power of narrative to teach ethics to children, and to cultivate their perception, empathy, and responsiveness to others. Stories were a kind of experiential and vicarious learning, because as humans we, write ourselves stories and take the role of character(s) in the story. Therefore, when Levi would tell stories of someone doing wrong, such as committing extremist acts, and another doing right such as building interfaith relations, he would show the consequences of each action and leave the young people to ponder which character they would rather be, based on the positive and negative consequences. This was how he vicariously educated the young people that extremism was wrong.

Levi's teaching in schools influenced a whole generation, giving them a sense of civic engagement which they would never lose, and we can learn much from it. He was willing to let the young take the stories where they wanted... what was important to them, it was important for them to learn. Today, we need to give young people

the voice they deserve.

Professor Johnson left the audience with a profound question: What kind of stories can be told, and who are the story-telling educators that would have that impact in the UK today?

Ms. Liz Dixon, Hate Crime Co-ordinator at London Probation, played a significant role in de-radicalising young people through building relationships with those charged under the Terrorism Act (TACT) and key referral agencies who can lend support in the rehabilitation process of young people. She emphasised that educating Practitioners was necessary for probation services throughout the world. London Probation was receiving first-hand training from SGCS, which was the catalyst for a change in the style of operation. This training enhanced the knowledge of frontline staff that enabled many TACT related offenders to be rehabilitated. She emphasised that this kind of collaborative approach needs to be adapted not only throughout the UK but also in Europe and beyond. She offered London Probation services to Pakistan in this regard.

Mr. Matthew Collins, a former member of a far-right British National Party, gave his speech at a time of increasing worry over the rise of far-right extremism, with the BNP's successes. He started by saying that he wished some of the media that prefer to portray Islam negatively were here to listen to what the Muslim community speaking at the conference had to say, and the good work that faith organisations, such as charities and schools, were doing. When he saw Kate Hoey, MP, it reminded him that he had been working against fascists for a decade, since after 1989 when Kate Hoey stood for election for Vauxhall. However, before this, he was a part of the National Front (NF). He pointed out that the NF had only three hundred members then, but two weeks previously, in the European elections, one million people voted for the heirs of the NF, the British National Party (BNP), even though the NF had twice the membership of BNP. NF struggled to get five percent of the vote, but now the BNP had sixty elected councillors, one GLA member, and two Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) after receiving ten percent of the votes. This was something expected yet unbelievable at the same time, as they had been underestimated in their force and impact.

The participants of the conference benefited from useful insight to the causes of BNP's successes and the danger of organisations like the BNP. He raised awareness of the fact that since the 7/7 there were approximately fifteen people who professed an extreme / radical form of Christianity or extreme political views linked to organisations like the BNP, who are currently in prison and/or awaiting trial for acts of terrorism.

He went on to say that in the last month, right before the elections, there were two men, a father and son, who were arrested for inciting racial hatred and terrorism. The father was sent to prison; the son was released back into the community but was not allowed to have contact with the organisation they were linked with, called the Aryan Strike Force. Interestingly, the group had only three registered members. However, when they raided his house, they found a bag of resin. Again, during the last elections, a dentist who was a former BNP candidate, built what was thought to be the largest domestic bomb ever, because he thought there was going to be a race war.

On 28 May 2009 in Batley, West Yorkshire, police arrested a white male involved in extreme right-wing activities for possession of firearms and possessing information thought to be useful for terrorism. On 29 June 2009, a 43-year-old was remanded on eight counts of terror-related charges for having explosive tennis balls and was only caught by chance, having been drunk and disorderly and trying to chat up a woman whom he said that he was going to throw the balls into a mosque.

Matthew said that people ask, regarding the scenarios above, why people couldn't air their differences through peaceful dialogue? As a former BNP member, he described why he felt at that time he couldn't use peaceful and political means, primarily because:

What questions would one ask, and to whom would they be asked, and would the person answering know why they were being asked? There were no answers to these questions. Therefore, training needs to be given to people, e.g., white van man, who doesn't know how to channel his anger, hence, a platform needs to be provided for an effective dialogue among such people, and those people who are often far removed from the situation, such as government institutions, need to be able to empathise with problems that the

person/community faces.

He highlighted the danger of the BNP in terms of a political shake-up:

‘Historically, the NF were only getting three to four percent of the votes and, due to the nature of the NF, it was clear that these were racist votes. However, now the far-right groups are getting a ten percent vote, which got BNP into the European Parliament, and this is worrying. The following statistics (YouGov Poll) are quite alarming:

- 87% of BNP voters think immigrants are a problem.
- 79% (1m people) consider Islam a danger to Western civilisation.
- 22-24% votes in some wards in the electorate.

‘The YouGov Poll statistics are better for young people who are far more confident about themselves and were more positive to the racial changes in areas such as Barking and Dagenham, where the borough went from 98% white to 33% mixed/diverse backgrounds, and have grown up in a diverse community, and thus have a better outlook than their older, previous generations.’

According to Matthew, there were several solutions that could be considered to tackle this worrying trend of white extremists. One such solution was to focus on commonalities, such as issues of employment, housing, work, and safety, as these things affect all communities.

He echoed the idea that political parties need to take heed and put forward a proposal for combating racism and fascism in political terms. Practitioners who are answering questions from far-right extremists need insight and training, and Matthew was pleased to hear comments from Liz Dixon that London Probation was receiving training from SGCS. He suggested that practitioners in all areas of counter extremism needed to be trained and offered his support where needed.

Maksud Gangat, Director of Al-Risalah Trust, sought to show practically how his educational establishment is addressing extremism. This was a great elaboration of the kind of work that Kate

Hoey MP described – that faith schools should take responsibility for and should be doing, i.e., facilitating integration of their students within wider society.

Maksud Gangat reminisced how The Memon Centre, the venue of the conference, was a befitting place to share in the celebration of their school's good work, as it was the place where Orchard Primary School (one of the four VA faith schools of the Al- Risalah Trust) started in 2003.

Al- Risalah, and the other four schools, had a clear mission statement from the very beginning, 'To provide in partnership with all stakeholders' excellence in education, values and community cohesion'. He then elaborated on how the role of the school contributed to the above, namely through teaching, student learning and the curriculum, all of which helped and facilitated the children in understanding other groups, promoting common values, valuing diversity, and promoting awareness of human rights. The teaching and the curriculum were also there to develop the sense of participation and responsible action.

Maksud Gangat cited several projects run by the school to facilitate community engagement. *The midsummer fun day*, which is 'a day to celebrate' and for the last two years, people have been attending in hundreds. Faith and non-faith schools, such as Fircroft Primary School, organisations from the wider community such as hospitals, fire authorities and police, come together and interact and learn from each other. *The Ibne Batuta event*, which is funded in part by the DCSF and the Religious Council, invites schools across Lambeth and Wandsworth where more than sixty schools visited Al-Risalah. Maksud Gangat stressed that this event is a testimony to his firm belief that faith schools cannot work in isolation, and that they need to integrate, and their children need to understand the wider aspect of the community. Al-Risalah also visited the Holy Ghost Roman Catholic school and participated in their assembly, and vice versa.

Maksud Gangat concluded by saying that through providing a balanced and enriched curriculum it would allow students to understand and appreciate firstly their own identity, whilst also appreciating the identity of others. Schools and educational institutions can play an important role in helping to shape the moral



and ethical fabric of society. Many critics of faith schools, in his experience, had been far right groups who had not taken the chance to visit them, but the engagement could dispel any negativity.

Professor Peter J Reynold from the University of Staffordshire was very intrigued to see Muslim led organisations such as Stockwell Green Community Services (SGCS) at the forefront of countering extremism and tackling radicalisation. He was particularly interested in the rehabilitation work carried out by SGCS in collaboration with London Probation. He proposed that this work be replicated in other areas of England, particularly in the North. Being an academic, he provided the following example of a simple way in which educational institutions could get involved in tackling the problem of extremism.

‘Our Stoke on Trent council elected quite a number of Far-Right British National Party (BNP) candidates around 2008, so we wanted to find ways to tackle this in the community through a university-led project.

‘We had the opportunity to rent a place for free in the busy Stoke on Trent shopping mall, which attracted ordinary people in the street, and some of those were BNP voters. We decided to use the shop to showcase the work of international students from the University to the local community. We had a Chinese student who brought traditional tea, and from Ghana, a student who brought sheer soap for cosmetics. Students from India and Sri Lanka had their local foods and Pakistani students dressed in national dress whilst serving traditional food. Now what was the reaction?’

People were looking through the windows and getting nervous.

Professor Reynolds told the audience of one instance where a lady asked why the students were here? The students responded that they were here to study. She followed up with asking why they couldn’t study in their home countries. She saw it as wrong that they were even in the country.

Professor Reynolds, however, believed that the presence of foreign students in the community was enough to start engaging and building bridges through merely working with each other, and this simple act could be done daily. The role of educational institutions can be as simple as organising extra-curricular activities.

# Divided We Fall, United We Stand

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*“O mankind, indeed We have created you from [a single pair of] male and female [that is Adam and Eve] and made you nations and tribes that you may know one another [not that you despise one another]. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.”*

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**Quran, 49:13**

*“On 22 July, the Lambeth United Forum was formed, and it consisted of the local authority, police, MPs and community representatives and me. Its purpose was to allow sections of Lambeth’s community to work together, share information, and be alert and reassured. It involved briefings, meetings, and regular email updates. The members were drawn from a broad range of faiths, ethnic groups, and backgrounds in Lambeth. The objective was to create a full and open dialogue about the events of July and their aftermath, as well as to engage people to work together for safety. The message from all this was abundantly clear, ‘United we stand; divided we fall.’”*



## Leading a delegation of Metropolitan Police to Pakistan

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of July 2005 in London and the mistaken identity shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes by the London Metropolitan Police Service at Stockwell Tube Station, breaking news was being flashed continuously on media channels. The communities were feeling the heat and so were the authorities. The problem for us was that the authorities were not organised enough to make a proactive plan of engagement. However, after making a case to a few good people, Lambeth Police was compelled to join our active programme of community engagement.

Having seen the important work being carried out and that we had identified the terrorists, Osman B Hussain and his associates, in 2003, I was requested to be part of the community reference group of the Independent Police Complaint Commission (IPCC) in the investigation into the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes. I had close interaction with the Muslim Contact Unit of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) which was aware of the pieces of information that we had provided to the MPS in 2003, and our subsequent concerns. The chair of the IPCC, Nick Hardwick, visited our centre for a Crime and Community Safety Meeting, accompanied by dignitaries, Lambeth Borough Commander, Kate Hoey, MP, and Chris Lee, Assistant Chief Executive of Lambeth Council, community leaders & councillors.

The shooting of Jean was accepted by the IPCC as 'an anti -terrorist operation that went wrong' – they referred the case to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) as they 'had decided that a criminal offence may have been committed'. Osman B Hussain, who Jean Charles was mistaken for and killed, was from Stockwell Mosque and the police were aware of this.

We had developed good relations with a section of Lambeth Police in 2004, when its officers joined us as partners on the first counter radicalisation project that was designed by SGCS and was match funded by the European Union and Stockwell Mosque. However, one of the major challenges for the police was engagement

and dialogue with disenfranchised young Muslims, who were eager to speak to someone about the issues they had but could not go to the police due to their lack of credibility.

Right from the early days we had managed to involve the police in some capacity through conferences/seminars arranged by our organisations at various intervals, and all borough commanders that took the helm of affairs. For example, Lord Brian Paddick, the then Borough Commander spoke on *The Role of Religions in Diminishing Terrorism* in January 2002.

## **Police Community Engagement Post-July 2005 bombing**

After the 7 July 2005 suicide attacks, Lambeth police stepped up the level and nature of their engagement with all sections of the local community. Rightly so, Muslims were included at the heart of that engagement, and their valued position within Lambeth Borough was stressed. Aside from a programme of public meetings, the police delivered reassurance messages in person at numerous faith venues.

Immediately after the failed suicide bombing attempts of 21 July 2005 (I warned the authorities about these people in 2003), one of which was in Lambeth, I held public meetings – near to the scene and across the borough – with local authorities and community leaders, where we gave a commitment to be open and to respond to the community's concerns.

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divided we fall’.

On 1st August 2005, I had a meeting with Sir Paul Stephenson, Deputy Commissioner, to initiate a process for developing future engagement with the Muslim community and disaffected youths. This engagement was acknowledged by the IPCC as good practice.

Following the events that surrounded the July 2005 bombings, the media coverage focused heavily on Pakistan in the training of the terrorists and their links with groups there. The country was seen as a hotbed for radical groups that were providing the wherewithal for terrorist activities. There was a mushroom growth along the borders, which had seen collusion between Afghan nationals and Pakistanis. These became known as training camps.

Due to this, I led a delegation of senior officers of the Metropolitan Police Service to Pakistan to interact with their counterparts to create understanding of the ground realities by meeting with the ordinary public, students, academics, lawyers, business community, police, religious leadership and of course, politicians. Sharing good practices was also one of the fundamental objectives of this visit. Apparently, it was not an easy task; in consultations and planning of the visit, we involved Sir Ian Blair, head of the Metropolitan Police, Peter Wilson from the British High Commission in Islamabad, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Pakistan Desk, and Mr. Wajid Shams ul Hasan, High Commissioner for Pakistan in London.

## **Dialogue Among Civilisations An International Conference Held in Pakistan - 7 May 2006**

The visit to Pakistan was approved jointly by the FCO and MPS. We had the proverbial green light and now pressure was mounting to prepare an effective itinerary that would give us achievable outcomes. The first of such arrangements was a conference. The resurgence in some areas of Samuel Huntington’s published seminal essay, *The Clash of Civilisations (1993) in Foreign Affairs* had started a new and unending debate in intellectual circles. It was being argued

that Huntington's vision of a world divided coupled with ancient cultural fault lines was coming to fruition and nearing its pinnacle.

'In this new world, the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilisations... the fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future', Huntington said.

Previously, it was said that this clash did not affect the West directly, although wars e.g., the Bosnian war, was perhaps a good example of what Huntington had in mind when writing his paper (the Bosnian war was a conflict of Christianity and Islam). The attacks of September 11, 2001 in the USA were seen as the epitome of Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' by large swathes of Americans. I had pin-pointed, time and again, that this 'theory' was being promoted and far right extremists were jumping on this bandwagon. I must confess that at the time, these theories were new to me, and I was fascinated at the rationale being given to take this argument to an extreme i.e., kick the Muslims out. The converse of leading young Muslims out of the throes of radicals was now our new objective.

The deconstruction of far-right extremist ideology, at the time built upon various other people's papers and theories, was increasingly difficult. Just as some sections of Muslims did not want to acknowledge a problem within our community, so did the indigenous 'white' community reject claims of extremism. I warned the police and local community then that although the current fixation was on Muslims, in the backdrop of the current situation, this problem was a ticking time bomb, ready to go off.

The community was urging leaders to counter this far right narrative, and we had to take the lead. The police, of course, were an important element of this as well as getting people of other faiths together. My first concern was demystifying the myths that were in the police force.

To that end, I organised a conference in Multan, Pakistan, entitled *Dialogue Among Civilisations* in Multan, to forge greater understanding of radicalisation and the issues surrounding suicide bombing, the role of religious institutions in tackling radicalisation, and the importance of building bridges between nations. I invited Commander Bridger and his colleagues to attend the conference. A

programme of associated high level and grassroots meetings was chalked out for the visit to Pakistan.

The aims of the visit were:

- To highlight the positive work done by the MPS with local communities in London
- To develop understanding of the influences on young Muslim males
- To develop understanding of the Pakistani/Muslim community
- To address the misconceptions and perceptions of the UK government amongst Pakistanis
- To address media representations of the MPS' engagement with, and treatment of, Muslims in the UK
- To seek Pakistani guidance on how to identify dangerous radicalisation of young Muslims within local communities.
- To promote the work we were doing in London to counter radicalisation and terrorism.
- To expand an otherwise localised view of the issues

Before departing for Pakistan, a meeting was held with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) to ensure that the visit in no way contradicted the FCO's aims. The Pakistan High Commission in London was also brought on board.

## **Meeting at the British High Commission, Islamabad, Pakistan**

The sound of cars beeping and the loud voices of stall owners pitching to potential customers, the freshness of vegetables and fruit, were drowned out as we rolled our windows up. We were on our way to the British High Commission in Islamabad to see its Political Counsellor, Mr. Peter Wilson. The British High Commission was buzzing and going through various changes, as the High Commissioner, Mark Lyall Grant, was about to relinquish his charge.



His successor was still to come and thus the FCO had nominated Mr. Wilson to compare notes with us. As Deputy High Commissioner, he was briefed on the purpose of our visit, and he fully endorsed our views. He said that the third sector was central to changing mindsets on the ground. He added that the government was working hard with Pakistani authorities to stamp out terrorism and support them in the war on terror.

We met Mr. Ijaz Ul Haq, Federal Minister for Religious Affairs & Minorities, at the Ministerial Secretariat in Islamabad. He was the son of the late President General Zia Ul Haq and had lived in Multan when his father was Corps Commander there. I briefed the minister about the visit and invited him to grace the conference on *Dialogue Amongst Civilisations* in Multan, Pakistan with his presence. He welcomed our initiative and promised to attend the conference. During our meeting, he explained the government's initiatives on engagement with the community. He emphasised the need for dialogue on community issues, agreeing that official visits for learning purposes should be encouraged.

Several conferences were held at various educational institutions where representatives of CNN, Reuters, Pakistan TV, the Nation, Dawn News, and others were present. Areas covered in the press conference included steps taken to reassure Muslims in London post-July 2005 suicide bombings, and the proactive approach of the mosque, where I was a trustee, in naming these terrorists, dealing with misconceptions about attacks on British Muslims and Mosques, such as sensational stories depicting 'Muslims under siege', and engaging with the community after the mistaken identity shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes.

We then moved to Bahauddin Zakariya University, located at Bosan Road, Multan. The main campus was spread over an astonishing 1200 acres of land. Prof. Dr. Naseer Khan, Vice Chancellor, received us in his office. We were ushered into a jeep and given a guided tour of the university. Peering out of the window at the entrance, we could see two huge arches constructed from red brick, like a Mughal-era inspired fortress. Atop the two arches lay the gold-plated name of the university. Three flags fluttered in the wind, two of the universities coveting the middle flag of Pakistan.

Traditional blue Multani tiles adorned the upper part of the pillars. We drove for what seemed like a mile, passing nothing but beautiful trees on both sides, as if standing guard over gardens and greenery. When we finally reached his office, it would probably be more than an acre of land. When briefed on the visit, he said that the University would extend full support and enable our delegation to interact with students and academics. He invited us for a separate seminar and dinner during our stay in Multan. Prof. Khan was keen to establish a chair in the university to address the issues of terrorism and radicalisation as this was a growing phenomenon in Southern Punjab.

The following day, we delivered a presentation to the 'Dialogue Forum' at the University followed by a dinner with the elite of Multan. The city of Multan is a politically enriched region of Southern Punjab, which has produced a President, a Prime minister, Governors, and Chief Ministers. The presentation was made to a group of senior academics, politicians, lawyers, members of the Chamber of Commerce & Industry, business magnates, students, etc. They acknowledged and appreciated the roles played by the MPS and Muslims in diffusing the terrorist threat in London. They lauded the visit as a practical and symbolic step towards improving mutual understanding and to devise effective ways to counter the ongoing threat of terrorism, where Pakistan suffered the most.

We had the privilege of meeting with the great Moulana Khawaja Khan Mohammed, a spiritual and religious leader of Naqshbandi lineage, at his home in Multan. He was incredibly supportive of the call for dialogue, and condemned terrorist activities. He appreciated the conference among his followers and emphasised the need to attend and support the initiative. He gave his commitment to have the mosques and centres linked to his lineage to work with the authorities and develop engagement plans with mosques to foster community cohesion on his next visit to the UK.

## **Meeting with the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Multan**

**06 May 2006**

As we had brought the Metropolitan Police on board for this visit, it was paramount to engage with the Punjab Police as well. In this connection, we met Mr. Mohammed Azam Joiya, Deputy Inspector General of Police. We exchanged views on a range of policing issues, from minorities in the workforce to intelligence gathering. It was a shock to learn that 700 people had been killed in 73 terrorist attacks in Pakistan in the last six months.

## **Meeting with Dr Andrew Francis, Bishop of Multan, Pakistan**

**07 May 2006**

In line with our interfaith work, we met Dr. Andrew Francis, Bishop of Multan. Pope John Paul II appointed him Bishop in 2000. The cathedral was constructed in 1848 and was a replication of the beautiful architecture in Multan. He offered his dedicated support for interaction with young people and local communities, particularly interfaith engagement. He stressed that leaders should focus on the similarities shared by communities rather than on differences. Bishop Francis was keen to adopt our model of multi-faith support and engagement with authorities, particularly after the 9/11 and 7/7 atrocities.

Peter Wilson assigned Yousaf Jomezai, Political Team Head at the High Commission, to attend the conference. He also attended our meeting with Maulana Fazal-ul-Rehman, the Opposition Leader of the Parliament of Pakistan, and Head of Jamiat ul Ulema Islam, a very influential and powerful religio-political party.

I organised a follow-up meeting to the conference with Maulana Fazal-ul-Rahman and sought his support in bringing the Pakistani community, particularly the religious segments, closer to the British communities in countering radicalisation. We discussed issues

concerning ways for political and religio-political leaders to engage in further dialogue that affected local communities. We also decided to visit the UK to encourage the mosques to participate in the political process and meet with parliamentarians in the UK.

Our approach fitted well with the Home Office CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy, particularly its PREVENT strand. All the staff members of FCO, particularly Peter Wilson, were willing to work with us to develop this programme further.

During our meetings, it was observed that the problem of disaffected young people 'becoming dangerously radicalised' was felt in Pakistan just as much as it was within the UK. The Metropolitan Police officers were surprised this but began to understand that radicalisation was a shared problem, for which both Britain and Pakistan should work for mutual interest.

Everyone agreed that the initiatives taken by us should be developed further and emphasised that government institutions on both sides should offer their effective support. Mr. Ijaz ul Haq, Federal Minister for Minorities and Religious Affairs, offered his support and outlined his proposals to register Madrassahs (religious schools) in Pakistan to ensure peace (not militancy), although Madrassahs were not the only problem. Mainstream academic institutions were also facing the problem of radicalisation festering among its students. He also urged us not to forget that the Madrassah network was the largest non-governmental charitable network where hundreds of thousands of children were provided with free education, shelter, clothing, and food, as well as a guaranteed job after graduation. There was a divergence in opinion as he also explained a governmental training programme to prompt those who lectured in Mosques (Islamic scholars, diplomats to focus on religious content, not political. Whereas in the UK, the mosques were being assigned the role to urge youth to become part of the political process. The then Deputy Inspector General of Police spoke of local police profiling potential terrorists and how much of the intelligence is based on community networks and engagement. He appreciated the counter extremism and counter radicalisation work being carried out through SGCS. As he said, there was a dire need for organisations with trust in the community to step in to support the government as,

at times, the government cannot always achieve its goals alone.

However, there was a consensus to 'do more' to identify those who may become involved in extremist actions far earlier; all felt that this was a significant challenge. Much of the challenge for the police was how to further galvanise community support and how to use those arrested in counter terrorism to become role models to be put into play when radicalisation was on the rise, when people of interest needed to be de-radicalised.

There was obviously widespread suspicion of the UK's foreign policy, even amongst moderates. However, it was emphasised that whatever the ideological background, ordinary people of all faiths in local communities were the ones that paid the price of terrorism.

Peter Wilson said that there was a widespread misapprehension about the level of anti-Islamic reaction in the UK. This was borne out in almost every meeting. Our explanation of the level of general solidarity with London's Muslims was well received, as was their emphasis on the extent to which the MPS has actively supported Muslims. Our press conferences gave him the opportunity to directly influence the skewed media reporting in Pakistan. Conversations with journalists revealed that they were themselves misinformed about the extent of anti-Muslim hate crime in London. We were able to correct their beliefs that a considerable number of Mosques had been burnt and Muslims routinely attacked.

These misconceptions were also widely held by students. We held numerous meetings with educational institutions, where students responded positively when told about the integration of Muslims with mainstream society and the level of unity the community had. The Vice Chancellor and faculty at Bahauddin Zakariya University were willing to organise conferences and/or seminars/workshops on these issues, specifically education and rehabilitation. A considerable number of those students came from outlying and tribal areas, where anti-western feeling was at its peak. The Vice Chancellor expressed his desire to work with Britain and the overseas Pakistani community to send a positive message through students across the country, as well as influencing those who may well achieve positions of authority in the near future. The conference and visit strengthened the grounds for increasing engagement with the Muslim community

through Mosques and Islamic centres, particularly in London. The engagement with local communities allowed us to design and implement ground-breaking programmes for counter radicalisation and de-radicalisation. The first Channel project was piloted in Lambeth and then rolled out to the rest of the country to address the early signs of radicalisation amongst youth through schools and other institutions. However, I advised the Government not to roll out the programme without proper evaluation of Lambeth's channel project. There was a need for further scrutiny and safeguards that the Government needed to consider.

## **Lectures at Bramshill Police Training Centre and Manchester Police Academy**

On returning from Pakistan, the authorities realised that they were lacking the awareness and training on dealing with Muslims and Islam in general. I was asked to provide training to the MPS and local authority, high security prison staff and probation staff. Following the success of the training, I delivered lectures at Bramshill Police Training Centre and Manchester Police Academy where over three hundred officers were given insight to the root causes of radicalisation and possible solutions. The design and implementation of programmes such as PROSEED and PALM (in London and later in South Yorkshire) also came through our visit to Pakistan and garnered partners such as MPS, London Probation, National Offenders Management Services (NOMS).

My close connection with Bahauddin Zakariya University, where I had studied, continued after the management had changed. In collaboration with other organisations, we managed to pull off conferences on education, extremism, and radicalisation in 2007, 2009 and 2010.

Our visit resulted in a report and a post-visit briefing which was given to the Home Office, 10 Downing Street, and 33 Borough Commanders. The report highlighted a variety of issues, including:

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- The importance of clear knowledge of the global political issues affecting Muslims, and how they are perceived by them, even when engaging over more localised issues.
  - The need for broader contact with Pakistan
  - A willingness to develop ways to identify possible terrorists earlier.
  - The vital importance of correcting inaccurate media reports, particularly outside the UK
  - The need to broadcast the positive treatment of Muslims in the UK to counter destructive international media reports to the contrary
  - The need to broadcast the positive contribution of Muslims within Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), local authorities.
  - That the cost to local communities (and all faiths within them) of extremism and terrorism should be stressed
  - The need to expand the link between current MPS work and that of the FCO.
  - Formal support for close work with Mosques and Imams (and, in Pakistan, with Madrassahs)
  - To explore the possibility to commission academic research from British universities having MOUs with Pakistani universities about effective methods of engagement with young, disaffected Muslims (and/or to engage further with the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University).

# Recollections from the Past

“

*How small the cosmos (a kangaroo's pouch would hold it), how paltry and puny in comparison to human consciousness, to a single individual recollection, and its expression in words!*

”

Vladimir Nabokov,  
Speak, Memory



*“We have gathered here today for this conference, titled the Future of Pakistan, for which I thank all of you who were able to make it here. I know this topic is like a double-edged sword for most of us who think that the current situation is either make or break for Pakistan. Our future is not only interesting for global leaders and actors, but it is also strange to see how countless numbers of people are talking, or worried, about Pakistan’s future. But what makes this situation so interesting?’ I could see some smiling faces in the audience.”*



Hassan Bokhari had a strange look on his face.

‘Mr. Qureshi, I couldn’t sleep the whole night,’ he told me while holding my hand. ‘I don’t know what will happen to Pakistan. Does it have a bright future or not? Will it be able to come out of the persisting darkness that has now been haunting it for a decade?’ He took a short pause and then carried on with his grieving thoughts.

‘For how long will we keep betting on dead horses? These political parties, be they PML, PPP or even PTI, it seems like they are good for nothing. They have never delivered and never will in the future. If we don’t derive any personal gains from them, why should we waste our time on them?’ he asked while staring directly into my eyes.

‘The overseas Pakistanis yearly send close to thirteen billion dollars in remittances which is far more than the one billion dollars yearly charity money we beg from the United States. If we stop sending this money, the system will collapse, yet the Government gives more importance to, and shapes policies around this one billion rather than the thirteen billion. We are having false hope by thinking that things may change.’

I could see where he was coming from. Mr. Bokhari, a renowned and successful businessman in the telecom sector, was one of those overseas Pakistanis who was always willing to invest in Pakistan and encouraged others to do so.

‘Mr. Qureshi I have a suggestion. As you already know, all of us – even those living abroad – are divided by race, cast, creed, ethnicity, and political affiliations. These local political parties of Pakistan have further divided us and kept us apart. Why not build a platform that could represent overseas Pakistanis to help them in solving their problems without any affiliation?’

My eyes lit up after hearing these words from Mr. Bokhari, as this was what I had always been thinking and wanted to pursue in one way or another.

‘I mean with this platform we can bring together influential overseas Pakistanis and guarantee them a positive outcome from their future investments in Pakistan. These investments could

become the chief catalyst for the dwindling Pakistani economy. Furthermore, we can bring together the best overseas Pakistani brains and formulate a blueprint to address our economic woes. This blueprint would include solutions for the failing economy, energy crisis and growing extremism. With our financial backing for the country, we can pressurise the Government in power to implement our ideas to ensure progress and transparency.'

I had a pleasant smile on my face. I liked the idea so much that it felt as if he had taken the words out of my mouth. I knew that, although difficult, the idea was not impossible to implement.

'We can change the fate of Pakistan within five years. We are among the smartest nations of the world. We can find oases within huge deserts. We have all the natural blessings in the form of limitless natural resources, favourable climate conditions and human capital. Yes, we have become 'suicidal' of late, but it's never too late to change. We have to induce the spirit of 'Living' in our coming generations.' Mr. Bokhari sounded very hopeful and even had tears in his eyes, which caught the attention of a few people in the lobby of the Hilton Hotel.

I firmly held his hand. 'My team and I are with you, Mr. Bokhari. In fact, every overseas Pakistani will be proud to support this noble cause. But as you know, we are heavily engaged with several stakeholders in countering extremism. However,' I added, 'we can also focus on education and health among others, in this proposal of yours.'

'I totally agree!' responded a contented looking Mr. Bokhari.

This was the beginning of our struggle in terms of the 'Future of Pakistan'.

## **'Time is a Great Teacher, but Unfortunately it Kills All its Pupils.'**

The Jubilee Room at the House of Lords seemed bustling and crowded. I tried to eye the audience. The room was full of members from the Conservative Party as well as members of the Lords. Almost everyone seemed to be glowing and happy. After a long wait, the

Tory party was declared the winner in the 2010 elections, yet, due to failure to secure a clear majority, was forced to form a coalition government.

The Bow Group, a renowned think tank, had arranged a welcome party for the new Government, where I was also invited to speak. I was the only Asian among the three speakers, including Peter Lilly, MP, and Lord Howell, and was honourably introduced by the Chairman of the Bow group, Annesley Abercorn, for who our work at the SGCS was the epitome of the 'Big Society in Action'. The then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Howell, spoke just before me.

It was my turn to speak, and I was short and precise with my words and message:

'I don't think I am going to make a speech after Lord Howell's. I am so intrigued that I have no words. But I will say only a few words. Stockwell Green Community Services has been introduced and the London College of Business Management and Information Technology is one of the projects set up in the last few years to alleviate poverty through employability enhancement. SGCS has been working on countering radicalisation and de-radicalisation with London Probation and the Metropolitan Police, along with partnering with three European Countries: Spain, Holland, and Germany, on several de-radicalisation programmes. Having said that, we have now also entered Pakistan. Last year, we took people from Germany and the UK to Pakistan and arranged meetings in six universities. We found out that radicalisation is on the rise in the country. This rise is visible not only in Pakistan, but also in other parts of the world, especially the UK. After all the congratulatory messages for the new Government, I think it is time we looked into this matter and the mess the last Government left us in, particularly in Afghanistan and the borders of Pakistan, where hundreds of people are being radicalised every day after seeing their loved ones being killed through drone strikes and then becoming suicide bombers seeking vengeance. Pakistan never saw this kind of menace before, with so many and frequent suicide attacks in the country. I have been suggesting for a couple of years now that it is about time for the US-led coalition to leave the matter of Afghanistan to the United Nations.

The UN should form a peacekeeping mission for Afghanistan. Not only that, but the OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation) should be given the responsibility of being part of the solution and not the problem. This is the most important message I would like to give here and with that, I thank the Bow Group for organising this event.'

As I concluded my talk, I recalled my live debate with Colonel Richard Kemp, a British NATO commander for Afghanistan, on Channel 4 News where he laughed off my suggestion of including the Taliban in the political process and peace dialogue... whereas today, many people have started to understand the context of the suggestion I put forward.

Kemp believed that the coalition forces needed to fight until they defeated the Taliban.

To this suggestion, I replied, 'Look at the IRA situation and Sinn Fein. We opened dialogue with them and now we have peace. Why can't we have dialogue with the Taliban? The war is radicalising people more and more. And we also see in Afghanistan that no developmental work is going on – developmental work would bring the people on board. Is the war worth it?' I concluded, while asking this question.

The combined cost of War on Terror, according to *Time* magazine, is five trillion dollars and counting, with no end in sight for these conflicts, or the chaos in these countries. Louis Hector Berlioz, a French composer, rightly said: 'Time is a great teacher, but unfortunately it kills all its pupils'.

## Britain on Fire

One day while on my way back home, I saw something strange near Brixton. There was an insane and random traffic jam with cars having nowhere to go. Even though you get used to traffic jams in London, this was something strange and new. When I tried to look out of my car, I saw dozens of young men whose faces and skin colour were not visible, due to their masks and attire. They were heading towards the cars in an angry manner, which created a wave

of fear among those stuck in the jam. Brixton is known for people of Afro-Caribbean descent and, coincidentally, it is the place where the world's first electrical pole was installed. The area had also witnessed notorious protests known as the Brixton riots in the 1980s and there used to be times when the London police kept its distance from Brixton. Cab drivers used to charge double for taking passengers to this area.

Then a change in British policy worked and people from other nationalities also came to the locality. I still remember facing strong opposition from Brixton Council on the same suggestion of accommodating other nationalities in the area, but I succeeded and was able to convince them with my reasons. Within a few years, Brixton became a multi-ethnic hub in London with residents from Pakistan, Portugal, India, Bangladesh, Somalia, Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Poland, along with Africans and Hispanics making up the additions.

I was now standing on Brixton High Street. The angry mob was running wildly, punching, and jumping over cars. For once I feared for my life but then realised that the mob's aims were something other than hurting the people. I saw Footlocker, a famous sports warehouse, being not only looted but also burnt to the floor by the angry mobsters. Many other shops were also being looted. I soon realised that the owner of the car in front of us had fled the scene, fearing that the situation may soon get out of hand.

This account is of a series of violent protests which raged from 6th to 10th August in 2011. It started after the shooting of Mark Duggan, a black Briton, who was killed by the Metropolitan Police in Tottenham, and within a couple of days spread to other parts of the country including Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, and Liverpool. The situation was the same in all the affected cities. Several individuals used to rally around meeting points in side streets and then head off for major stampedes and chaotic runs on high streets. Their main goal used to be breaking down doors and shutters of shops and malls and looting whatever they could get hold of. The police were already under severe pressure and criticism following the death of Duggan and thus looked helpless against these looting gangs and thugs. Social media was being effectively utilised by the

troublemakers to proclaim their activities, and tools such as Twitter, Facebook and Blackberry Messenger were used to spread the fire. According to the *Guardian* newspaper, one BBM broadcast said, 'Everyone from all sides of London meet up at the heart of London (central) OXFORD CIRCUS!! Bare SHOPS are gonna get smashed up so come get some (free stuff!!!) f\*\*k the feds we will send them back with OUR riot! If you see a brother... SALUTE! if you see a fed... SHOOT!'

The media were misreporting the whole incident as an uproar by youth against the Government, whereas the scenes on the streets resembled those of a Hollywood movie showing the aftermath of a major attack on earth, where a limited number of humans are left to fight each other to get hold of limited resources.

Then, Britain's conscience took a U-turn as every senior official, including the members of the opposition, called off their vacations and went back to work. An emergency session of Parliament was called to discuss the situation and after twenty-four hours, PM Cameron declared that this whole development was an effort to spread chaos and anarchy and was not a protest. Therefore, the perpetrators would be dealt with as criminals. He drafted an extra ten thousand police officers to strengthen security, but thanks to security cameras installed in every shop, it was easy to catch the close to 3500 miscreants involved in the protests. For the first time in the history of the UK, the courts were even working on Sundays to conclude these cases on a war footing.

Harsh sentences were given to all those involved, in order to make them an example for others to avoid such circumstances in future. Along with expensive items that were stolen, some were stealing nappies, sweets, and rice. Parents started to volunteer by taking their sons and daughters who were involved, to the police stations. I still can't forget the mother who got her daughter arrested; the same daughter who was supposed to compete in the London Olympics.

When the dark clouds of protests cleared from the skies of England, five people had lost their lives, with dozens injured and in hospital. The Government also incurred close to £300 million in losses and damages.

I still recall what the Home Secretary, Theresa May, said after the

riots:

‘Gangsters and looters are taking refuge under the garb of protests for their crimes, but we won’t tolerate such criminals and will use an iron fist against them.’

These words reminded me of one of my meetings in Pakistan where I met the Inspector General of the Punjab Police, Javed Iqbal, Director General FIA, Nasir Khan Durrani and Law Minister Punjab, Rana Sanaullah. I was invited by Mr. Sanaullah who wanted to create an institution on the model of London Probation and thus wanted my suggestions. During the meeting, the IG Punjab, while rubbing his forehead, agonisingly expressed that working as the head of police was one of the toughest jobs in the country due to increasing pressures from political circles. According to him, the only way to tackle crime was through strong political will which the country lacked.

For me, the law-and-order situation in Pakistan could change within days if the police, community, and most importantly, the politicians, showed the same strength and willpower to change things as their counterparts showed in the UK.

## **Conservative (Party) Friends of Pakistan**

‘We are tied in a strong bond with Pakistan. Pakistan’s friend is our friend, and its enemy is our enemy,’ said the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, in his speech addressing the Pakistani diaspora, and the audience in a relatively grim looking hall, burst into appreciative applause. It seemed as if the PPP ministers, Qamar Zaman Kaira, Makhdoom Ameen Faheem, and Rehman Malik, looked more enthusiastic than others in their clapping.

The hotel was full of influential and renowned British Pakistanis who had gathered for the launch of the Conservative Friends of Pakistan (CFoP) initiative. The gathering also had members of the Conservative Party present as well as the then Cabinet Minister, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, who warmly greeted and hugged my wife, Gulshan, on seeing her. Warsi was happy that several Pakistanis were



accompanied by their families. The main motive behind forming this Forum was to lobby for Pakistan within the Conservative Party in an effective manner where cooperation could happen in sectors like health, education, and development, and focus on Trade rather than Aid. Baroness Warsi decided that before she vacated her post as Chairman of the Conservative Party, there should be a group of people, or a platform, which could work positively for Pakistan. It was also nice to see the Pakistan Flag-like banner of the Forum hanging high on the walls of the hall.

I was feeling happy and proud to see all the British Pakistani Members of Parliament and House of Lords. Their achievements are a source of pride for our community in the UK.

PM Cameron arrived with PM Gilani after having a brief meeting at 10 Downing Street.

A few dozen members of the then Opposition party, PML N, had gathered outside the hotel shouting and making Victory signs, coinciding with retired Sussex police officials who were also protesting – against cuts to their pensions.

I met the newly appointed Chairman of the CFoP, Michael Wade, during the event. He is part of the Wadia family into which the daughter of the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was married. He is a success in the banking sector of the UK. Sayeeda Warsi, while speaking, proudly admitted to being the daughter of a labourer who, although born in Pakistan, still learnt the true meaning of life in Britain.

Then the British Prime Minister greeted the audience with, ‘Assalamalaikum’, which sent cheers throughout the hall. He also took the credit for the appointment of the first ever Pakistani Muslim as a Cabinet Minister.

Cameron also discussed his experience of living with a Pakistani family in Birmingham, where his aim was to get accustomed to Pakistani culture. He rued the fact that Britain was not as great as it used to be in the past – probably in reference to the previous year’s London riots. After winding up his speech, he invited PM Gilani to speak, whose concluding story became the highlight of his address:

*‘While coming back with PM Cameron in his car, we got stuck in traffic due to protests.*

*Mr. Cameron said, in a light manner, 'We should do something in order to be in time for the dinner.'*

*'What should we do?' I asked.*

*'He replied, 'Either we walk or take the train. But suppose we walk, are you sure that if the Nawaz supporters see us, they won't attack us?'*

This story sent waves of laughter across the hall, and I started thinking how that was where the line was drawn between Britain and Pakistan – a huge difference. The PM of Britain is not even afraid to walk or take the train, whereas his Pakistani counterpart would not even think of doing this in Pakistan.

## **“Babe to Burqa” – Kristiane Backer**

When the body of Khalil Dale, (a British aid worker from the Red Cross who had converted to Islam), was found in Baluchistan, his old colleagues shouted, 'Khalil has reached his final destination where he always wished to go.' New convert, Abdul Hakim (previously known as Tim Winter), was recalling Dale's struggles for humanity as in how he went from Afghanistan, into Somalia and then finally Pakistan, having a passion for helping poor Muslims, only to become a victim of the very same people whom he had wished to help.

One thing which is very commonly analysed and researched in Europe is that even with all the negative portrayals, links to terrorism, and the bad images associated with it, why is Islam still the fastest growing religion in Europe? And why is everyone attracted to it?

This reminded me of an event I was attending at the Islamic Centre in Tooting where journalist and activist Lauren Booth, sister-in-law of Tony Blair and a convert to Islam, was giving a speech in a hall full of people. She revealed that the number of converts in Britain had exceeded 100,000 with the average being a 27-year-old white female. This number has doubled in the past ten years. The audience looked excited and ecstatic after listening to her speech and the facts she presented. During an informal discussion, Booth told me that many converts, especially white women, say that they have found their real selves and don't feel enslaved by this 'broken society with

expectations’.

‘This is what makes me cry’, said Kristiane Backer, a renowned MTV presenter, who had converted to Islam and wrote an eye-opening account in her book entitled *From MTV to Mecca*.

‘White women, especially those who are educated and have done well in life, when converting to Islam become nothing more than a trophy for the Muslims, a trophy that is showcased and touched by everyone, yet is of no further use.’

‘Further use?’ I asked, trying to understand what she meant.

‘When foreigners convert to Islam, they need to learn more about the religion. First, they are given the hard choice of deciding to join a specific sect in Islam, and when they do that, they find it hard to find a scholar who can speak their language as most speak Hindi, Urdu, Arabic or Bengali. Furthermore, no one wants to marry a tall, white convert as they feel it would be hard to tame a European girl who is aware of her basic rights,’ said a rather depressed Backer.

‘Then what happens afterwards?’ I asked out of curiosity.

‘Most of these girls, failing to get their place in the Muslim community and in confining to the norm, become depressed and have other issues. Their social life is close to nothing, and I know a lot of girls who, failing to cope with this depression, go back to their old lifestyles. But still, this number is not that high.’

Kristiane, soon after accepting Islam, left her lucrative MTV job and cancelled several her contracts. She is now living a common and modest life, where the main aim of her life is to create a big Islamic Centre in London for Muslim women who can learn the basics of Islam without any sectarian affiliation. She failed to find a publishing house for her book for two years and so I extended my helping hand. Her book is now widely read and among her readers are celebrities such as Bob Geldof, the famous musician who summarised the book as *From Babe to Burqa*.

After Backer’s revelations, I also became involved in research work being done by Cambridge University on the same issue and found out that the situation is more complex than I had expected. A few non-Muslims, while using the internet, carry out their own search for truth and religions and through this, come to accept Islam as the religion or set of beliefs they are looking for. But then comes

the hard part, as their family and friends usually disown them. They then come across the so-called Muslim leadership, who are not the ideal role models. Further, these converts, although praised by many Muslims, are never accepted as their own by members of the Muslim communities because most of the Muslim centres are functioning on ethnic and regional denominations from back home, as I also observed in the initial days of the Stockwell Islamic centre, as it was known to be a Pakistani mosque. Realising the detrimental effects of such denominations then, I opened the centre for everyone. For that reason, most of the new converts spent a lonely and depressed life.

Lauren Booth brought another young white convert to my office who was in desperate need of community support, which I then extended to her. Not knowing that many Muslims, and being disowned by her family here, she had nowhere to go. She was neither here, nor there.

## **An evening with General Richards**

The General was a picture of seriousness.

'In Nepal, a supposedly junior Indian diplomat almost aggressively told me, 'General, you don't know anything about Pakistan as you are very soft towards them. A guy in your position should know much more than you do.'

This was General Sir David Richards, Chief of Defence of the British Army, telling me one of his accounts of interacting with an Indian over Indo-Pak relations. This was when I realised that the Indian Pakistan relations could not be solved that easily. We were at Kensington Palace, where General Richards's wife had invited us for evening tea. I was also accompanied by my staff at FIRD, along with Mustafa Kamal, captain of the cricket team that was about to visit Pakistan to raise funds for Afghan children.

'General, our point of view is pretty simple on this issue. When it comes to Bosnia, East Timor, and Kosovo, the solutions are implemented in a split second. But when it comes to Kashmir, the international community says that it's an internal matter for both neighbours, which needs dialogue to be solved. The International

community can't absolve itself from its responsibility for solving this major issue that is killing a number of soldiers on high glaciers, like Siachin, and also on the borders. We inherited this issue from the British Raj, and thus Britain should play its active role,' I replied, rather emotionally, but General Richards nodded in approval.

Kensington Palace is a marvel. The entrance door to General Richards's residence was opened by an Army Major. The halls were big as well as packed with security personnel, with the expectation that the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Prince William, and Princess Kate, would soon be moving there. Although the General had three to four bedrooms at his disposal, their sizes were the same as those of any small London house, and the living room could only accommodate a mere fifteen people. Caroline, Lady Richards, the General's wife, brought us drinks on a tray, and their daughter, Joanna, who worked at 10 Downing Street, brought a tray full of baked potatoes and fried fish.

General Richards, who had a meeting with the then Pakistani Army Chief, General Kayani, seemed to have been impressed by him.

'It seems as though General Kayani will complete his term without indulging in an adventure, and thus another theory will prove true that any general from the Potohar region of Pakistan can never impose Martial Law.' This was Carey Schofield, the author of *Inside the Pakistani Army*.

'Carey... you never know these generals'. It was General Richards who commented with a sarcastic wink. 'Sometimes they just impose Martial Law and then try to justify it with countless reasons,' he added.

General Richards then diverted his attention to me and said, 'Mr. Qureshi, I admire your work furthering Indo-Pak peace, yet keep in mind that when a soldier enlists in the military, he is always ready to fight and when war comes, he is the most important person. So, make suggestions keeping the 'soldiers' in mind.'

Before I could speak, Carey intervened. 'I used to think that the Pakistani nation was a victim of one of the biggest propaganda campaigns. They think like they are in the fairy tales of a Demon living on a faraway land, which in this case is India. But that is not

the case. When I went to Pakistan, things were different and what we read in the media is totally wrong. Pakistani people are honest and humble people. They live a dignified life and endure a lot of problems. We cannot even comprehend the extent of those problems. They just dream and wish for something to happen that will change their fate.'

'I think it's important to dream and that is why we are dreaming to beat the Pakistani team,' said Kamal, the captain of the cricket team, and who was the nephew of a famous veteran pilot, MM Alam, while raising his glass high in the air for a victory toast.

'It's hard, Kamal, but anyway, there is no harm in dreaming. We also dreamt of beating Pakistan in the 1992 Cricket World Cup Final,' said the General with a burst of laughter.

'No one can beat us at dreaming. Pakistan was founded based on a dream. Currently we are stuck in a very bad dream. And we hope for a golden dream for the future,' I responded, while trying to wrap up the discussion.

'Watch out Pakistani boys and girls. You will get some big news from your country in the coming years,' said General Richards while seeing us off. He then came up close to me, closed one of his eyes in a slow wink, and murmured in my ear, 'Keep dreaming, Mr. Qureshi.'

## **Future of Pakistan Conference, London**

**28 June 2012**

There was no space left to accommodate any more people at the Boothroyd Room of the House of Commons. I looked over the audience seats and saw MPs, senior journalists, officers from the US State Department and British Commonwealth office and experts from various renowned think tanks. On my right were Dr Farooq Sattar, Minister for Overseas Pakistanis, and Professor Stephen Cohen, renowned authority and expert on South Asia and Pakistan from the Brookings Institute, USA. On my left were Mr. Sadiq Khan, Member of the British Parliament, Lord Qurban Hussain, General (R) Syed Athar Ali, who served as Defence Secretary in Pakistan, and

Professor Anatol Lieven of Kings College, and author of the famous bestseller *Pakistan, a Hard Country*.

This was the start of a two-day conference with the title of *The Future of Pakistan arranged by FIRD*, where experts and academics were invited from different parts of the world. Carey Schofield and Dr. Robin Brooke-Smith were also an integral part of the conference.

I started my presentation on a positive note.

'We have gathered here today for this conference, titled the Future of Pakistan, for which I thank all of you who were able to make it here. I know this topic is like a double-edged sword for most of us who think that the current situation is either make or break for Pakistan. Our future is not only interesting for global leaders and actors, but it is also strange to see how countless numbers of people are talking, or worried, about Pakistan's future. But what makes this situation so interesting?' I could see some smiling faces in the audience.

'First of all, let's take Professor Cohen's book, *The Future of Pakistan*. The book presents a bleak picture of Pakistan, explaining that the current chaos could go on for quite some time. The situation could even worsen further. We could also come under an extremist or a military rule. In this 21st century, we have nothing but problems. We have a severe energy shortfall, industries are collapsing, and no one is investing, while there is growing insecurity all over the country. In this craziness, whatever one says makes no sense in the country,' I noted.

'Even at dinner last night, I was asking Professor Cohen why everyone is interested in Pakistan, and not in other countries such as Bhutan, Brazil, or Poland. Professor Cohen replied that in the past few years, the reason for everyone talking about Pakistan has made the country a newsmaker. The mere possession of nuclear weapons makes Pakistan an important country and the fact that it is geographically placed in a unique position also makes matters worse. Professor Cohen then recalled a story of a US Foreign Secretary, who, in the time of the Cold War, exploded at him and his analysis of 'hope', saying that there is no such policy as 'hope'. Then Dr Humayun Khan, former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, added that if hope can't be a policy, then neither can hopelessness. If we can't be

too hopeful, we also can't be too hopeless.'

I could now see a grim smile on Prof Cohen's face.

The conference proved to be a bigger success than we expected. After this two-day conference, Dr Farooq Sattar promised to forward legislation for giving more rights and representation to overseas Pakistanis in Parliament, which he did. The conference memorandum also asked the US to apologise to Pakistan for attacking the Salala check post and killing more than twenty Pakistani soldiers so that bilateral ties could move forward. Luckily for us, just two days after the conference, the US officially apologised for the attacks and soon people started sending me congratulatory messages. This was indeed a happy and a funny situation as I am not so naïve as to believe that it happened because of our conference... but it was nice for people to extend credit.

One of the major outcomes of the conference was the formation of a contact group comprising of British, American, and Pakistani experts, who were to play their part in the resumption of trilateral dialogue among older allies should situations like Salala arise in the future. Furthermore, overseas Pakistanis were also asked to unite on a single platform without any political affiliations and work towards the betterment of Pakistan.

After hearing these announcements, I had tears in my eyes as I recalled Mr. Bokhari's dream of creating such a platform. One of those dreams was being realised and another dream was just starting to take off. I couldn't have been happier as I knew I had at least contributed something towards my birthplace.

## **Entrepreneurs 2012 Conference with President Bill Clinton, London**

**16 November 2012**

The hall was dominated by camera flashes as everyone having a camera wanted to get a snap of the chief guest – former US President, Bill Clinton, who was shaking hands and greeting me at the after-event dinner of the 2012 Entrepreneurs Conference.

While promoting the conference, Clinton said, 'In today's



challenging economic climate, entrepreneurs need our support more than ever, and we need their success. Often, it is small entrepreneurs that drive economic growth in their communities, creating jobs and opportunities for people who need them most.'

The conference included other famous people such as Bear Grylls, host of Discovery Channel's *Man vs. Wild*, Kevin Spacey, Academy Award winning actor, Ruby Wax, leadership expert and international comedienne, Levi Roots, entrepreneur, chef and musician behind *Reggae Reggae Sauce*, and Bruce Dickinson, investor, and former lead singer of Iron Maiden, among others.

While meeting President Clinton, I felt as if I was under a spell. However, this spell wasn't cast by Mr. Clinton but by flashes of various events coming into my mind relating to US policies in the past three decades.

These flashes included the US adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, the then dwindling US economy and the closure of major US firms, a huge number of US soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan facing psychological ailments, and the US now trying to find a way out by bringing the Taliban to the dialogue table. Mr. Clinton's presence made me think of all of this and how the global geopolitical landscape had changed within a couple of decades.

Although I was supposed to talk on eliminating racial prejudice in workplaces, I also shed light on discrimination stemming from faith, along with the global problems created because of the US campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Muslim states. Additionally, I shared with the audience my life experiences and how I survived the prejudice and discrimination at my workplace and how I did not allow them to hinder my progress in life. That is how, and why, I became a successful entrepreneur. I concluded that both the employer as well as the employee shared equal responsibility to root out this menace of prejudice. A hall – packed with more than 6000 people – including intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and famous media celebrities, clapped in appreciation of my views at the conclusion of my speech.

The conference ended with President Clinton's speech, which gave several pragmatic suggestions for ending violence and promoting economies throughout the world. We all agreed with his

ideas, but I also wished that if he, or other ex-US Presidents had been thinking like this when they were in power, then the world today would have been a completely different place.

As they say in Persian:

*Aey Basa Arzu e Khak Shud*

(The wish went all in vain)

## **Pakistan: Opportunities in Crisis An international conference in collaboration with the University of Oxford**

**11 May 2014**

It was another bright day in my life as I opened my eyes with the sweet chirping of birds outside the Days Inn hotel in Oxfordshire. I had to get ready for a two-day conference titled *Pakistan: Opportunities in Crisis*, which was partly sponsored by FIRD and organised at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford. This conference was one of a series that had resulted from our declaration at the *Future of Pakistan* conference. The conference, organized by Oxford's Quaid e Azam Fellow Dr Ishtiaq Ahmad, hosted renowned experts and academics, namely Mr. Imtiaz Gul, Dr Faisal Devji, Prof Ian Talbot, Prof Waseem, Dr Ayesha Siddiqa, Prof Rasul Bakhsh Rais, Mr. Owen Bennett Jones, Prof Rashid Amjad, Prof Hassan Abbas, Prof Yunas Samad, Mr. Mosharraf Zaidi, Miss Huma Yusuf and me, among others. The sessions during the conferences focused on various areas, including Democratic Transition and Prospects, Imperatives of Economics, Foreign Policy Persistence and Change, and the Role of the Media and Education. My main aim for backing this conference was that it seemed an ideal opportunity to support an initiative aiming to promote a positive image of Pakistan. The panel discussions helped generate several convergent as well as divergent views among the panellists and discussants.

Dr Faisal Devji, Director of Asian Studies Centre at Oxford, in his keynote address asked the experts to dwell upon the historical

narrative of Pakistan's ideology and how it influenced the social makeup of Pakistani society.

Education, awareness, and community involvement are the key to fighting radicalisation, was the conclusion of my presentation at the conference in Oxford. I reflected upon my experience as a counter radicalisation expert in the UK, and how my successful models were pragmatic enough to counter radicalisation in Pakistan. I was also of the opinion that the same model was easily implementable in Pakistan for de-radicalisation in the Frontier region. For me, radicalisation in Pakistan could be tackled through the three-pronged model implemented by Stockwell Green Community Services. The first stage of this model was Problem Identification, while the second was the early prevention model followed by the final stage of rehabilitation.

I further explained our model of counter radicalisation and how, through the model, the 'infected people' (or the radicals) would be 'disinfected'. For me, civic responsibility and ownership were of utmost importance in countering these issues. The major mistake while tackling radicalisation was Muslims being portrayed as a part of the problem, and not as a solution. But learning from this mistake, we focused on inclusion of people which helped to solve this social issue.

I further emphasised the need for education, dialogue, and rehabilitation to be used for countering radicalisation. In the final part of my presentation, I concluded with my suggestions for education awareness campaigns and the increased role of communities, along with inclusion of all societal stakeholders during the counter radicalisation process.

Overall, the conference was a great experience. Positives included presentations from economists and economic experts who painted a bright picture of the potential the Pakistani economy possessed and how, with the right steps, it could move in a forward and positive direction. The conference concluded on a positive note with the UK experts appreciating the efforts put in by the organisers to bring on board experts and policy analysts from Pakistan to discuss the issues and solutions for a better Pakistan.

This conference was another feather in the cap of FIRD and SGCS,

which are constantly doing their best to support such initiatives and to come up with positives both for Pakistan as well as the UK. The concluding session of the conference was held at FIRD where mementos were presented to the speakers, and they then indulged in Pakistani traditions.

## **A Strategic Dialogue with Pakistani Christian Leadership at Oxford**

**June 2014**

‘I have first-hand experience of living as a minority, being a British Pakistani Muslim in a predominantly white Christian community. I faced a great amount of racial and religious prejudice but did not allow these negatives to hamper my progress in British society. I could have chosen to react against these prejudices and may have gone into a state of self-imposed exclusion, but I didn’t, and thus fought against them in order to move on with my life. I would add here that, even after these aforementioned negatives, I still found this country to be full of opportunities for everyone – irrespective of religion, caste, colour or creed – but I had to work hard to become a successful entrepreneur and to earn recognition from Her Majesty the Queen for my services to the community.’

These were my opening words at the summer retreat of the Bishops of the Church of Pakistan who met at Ripon College, a Church of England theological institute outside Oxford. I was specifically invited by the head of the Churches of Pakistan, Bishop Samuel Azariah, who also happened to be a good friend of mine, to have a strategic brain-storming session on the central theme of how the diaspora in the UK could help minorities in Pakistan, who were currently facing the menace of extremism and terrorism, through interfaith harmony programmes and further community relations development. It was to my advantage; I had strong connections with the Church leadership both in Pakistan as well as the UK and had closely worked with both these sections to understand and address socio-economic and religio-political issues.

The participants at this exclusive and strategic session were Bishop Samuel Azariah (Head of the Church in Pakistan and Bishop of Raiwind), Bishop Irfan Jamil (Lahore), Bishop Humphrey Peters (Peshawar), Bishop John Samuel (Faisalabad), Bishop Sadiq Daniel (Karachi), Bishop Rimal Shah (former Bishop of Peshawar), Umar Mahmood (Director Operations, FIRD), and Rev. Rana Khan, who had helped in organising this programme.

‘Not only Christians, but all the communities in Pakistan are subject to militancy and terrorism. Be it the Sunnis, Shiites, or the minorities, or be it a fruit market, a mall, a mosque, or a church, or be it a sensitive state building; nothing and no one is safe in the country. Terrorism is a global phenomenon, and a tiny minority disrupts religious harmony. What we need to do is to show resilience as a nation to combat this vicious nuisance,’ I added.

I also emphasised exploring the possibilities of strengthening interreligious harmony in the UK and Pakistan by using influence, connections, and relations among the Pakistani diaspora community to enhance the effectiveness of having meaningful interfaith dialogue.

One of the most positive and heart-warming incidents that we learnt from the dialogue was shared by the Bishop of Peshawar who revealed that soon after the deadly suicide blast on Peshawar’s Cathedral, it was the Muslim community which generously extended their helping hand and condemned this barbaric act. The Bishop also told the delegation about my visit to Peshawar and how I not only extended my support to the bomb-affected families but also offered them scholarships at our College. This gesture was appreciated across the board by the Christian leadership of Pakistan.

Also giving a great insight was Bishop Sadiq Daniel from Karachi, who said that the Churches had not been attacked in his city due to the high level of effective communication and interaction between Christians and Muslims from the grass roots to leadership levels. His experience was a suggestion as in most parts of Pakistan such an interaction was lacking. Thus, there was a need for enhancing the interfaith dialogue, endorsing my previously made suggestion. The Church delegation also complained that the constitution of Pakistan did not allow a minority community member to become Head of State. I responded that there were several Christians who were

members of the provincial and national Parliaments, and thus the primary need for the Christian community was to first get into the corridors of power by negotiating with the political parties to have representatives nominated for prominent positions in Parliament, such as the Deputy Speaker or the Speaker or even the Deputy Prime Minister. I further suggested that there should be a 'unified voice' for the Christian community in Pakistan that could represent the whole community and take their issues up to those holding power.

I reminded the delegation about my previous meetings with Bishop Alexander John Malik and Bishop Azariah, where I pointed out the mishandling of the famous Asiya (Noreen) Bibi blasphemy case in 2009. Asiya, a Christian, was accused of blasphemy and thus was facing a death sentence. Salman Taseer, the then Governor of Punjab, took a stand and advocated her release. Taseer, without realising the sensitivity of the case, called a press conference and tagged the blasphemy law a black law, and not only offended the masses, but also invited the radical elements to take extreme measures. Taseer's party, the PPP, was the ruling party at that time, and so he could have used other indirect means, such as calling on the police and judiciary, and expediting the case to higher courts for speedy justice. But instead, he opted to deal with the issue politically thus creating a media frenzy which badly backfired and not only resulted in his murder but also failed to set Asiya free from prison. Learning from this, Rimsha Masih's case, where she faced a possible death penalty under the blasphemy law for allegedly desecrating pages from the Holy Quran, was handled in the manner I had previously suggested to the Pakistan Ulema Council Chair, Allama Tahir Ashrafi, during his visit to FIRD to discuss blasphemy law and its use. I called upon the Christian and Muslim leadership to rationally assess such situations before they became a political issue and reached the point of no return, with the Muslim scholars taking the lead. That is why, this time around, Muslim leaders in collaboration with the Christian community, launched strong advocacy campaigns for justice, and thus the accuser, a mullah, who had accused Rimsha of blasphemy, was arrested once it was shown that he had fabricated the evidence against Rimsha. My point, and advice, for the Christian community here was simple: rather than

politicising such issues and making it a football game where points are scored, it is better to get majority sections of society on board to advocate for your case so as to avoid a possible backlash like the one that resulted from the Asiya Bibi case.

In the end, I offered my full support to facilitate meaningful interfaith dialogue in Pakistan and the UK. I felt that such facilitation would not only help in addressing the minority grievances and fears but would also save those who were in a mode of self-imposed isolation.

# Jihad – A Struggle, Right vs Wrong

‘Struggle (Jihad) here is not right  
versus left; it is right versus wrong’

“

*The best form is Jihad against  
oneself (i.e. to fight your own  
desires and inner base form) in the  
obedience of God Almighty*

”

**Muhammad**  
(peace be upon him),  
the Prophet of Islam

“

*“Struggle [Jihad] here is not right  
versus left; it is right versus  
wrong.”*

”

**President Ronald Reagan**



*“My strategy has always been to listen, never to shut people down, especially the youth. Instead, I encourage them to vent their anger at the right platform rather than leaving them to fall into the wrong hands, where their anger may be manipulated to fulfil the hidden, heinous desires of the manipulators.”*



It was a nice, sunny afternoon. I had just finished my Friday prayers at the Khatme Nubuwwat Centre (KNC), Stockwell, and stayed behind as usual to listen to the problems of some of the local people and try to help where possible. Usually, the issues varied from domestic problems to 'Stop and Search' by local police related to immigration matters, housing, schooling, and employment issues, etc. At KNC, a variety of people offered Friday prayers; I believe that more than twenty different nationalities attended. On this day, a group of young university students (a mix of Arab and Asian heritage) introduced themselves to me.

One, who introduced himself to me as Mo, said: 'Mr. Qureshi, the constant distortion and misrepresentation of Islam by the media has been causing me grave concern. Their reports are as good as adding fuel to the fire of Islamophobia throughout the UK! It is leading to a huge increase in nationalist extremism from the far-right. You can see groups like the English Defence League and Britain First popping up, using media reports to promote and condone terrorist attacks on mosques and Islamic Centres. They raid and invade mosques. There have been arson attacks as well.'

Another youngster, Adam, added, 'According to one organisation that records anti-Muslim hatred, launched by the ruling Conservative Party former chair and former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Sir Eric Pickles, there were around 729 reported incidents of Islamophobic attacks in 2015. But these numbers aren't accurate – there are many more which unfortunately have not been reported.' He further added, 'We can see its impact on the foreign students as well. I am sure you heard about the far-right extremist and white supremacist who admitted killing a female Saudi doctoral student, Nahid Almanea, by stabbing her sixteen times just because of her Islamic dress. She was just walking from her student accommodation towards the University of Essex and was not harming anyone. Why do they always attack the weak and vulnerable? The politicians, from what it looks like, are also in this race of criticising the way Muslim women choose to dress themselves. They're not far behind! When they throw around and repeat the word Islam with negative connotations like Islamic State terrorists, Islamists, Islamic Jihadists, Islamic terrorists, Islamic

Extremists, Islamic radicals, Islamification of the UK etc., they're playing right into the hands of the people grooming and radicalising people and the far-right extremists.'

My strategy has always been to listen, never to shut people down, especially the youth. Instead, I encourage them to vent their anger on the right platform rather than leaving them to fall into the wrong hands, where their anger may be manipulated to fulfil the hidden, heinous desires of manipulators.

'I strongly recommend that you lobby the media and politicians to play a responsible role as they represent us all,' he continued. 'They have a duty to make sure that their words aren't spreading extremism or violence by misrepresenting Islam. They risk marginalising us ordinary law-abiding Muslims living in the UK, because of this silly witch hunt.'

'To be fair, some of the media have started using the term 'so-called Islamic State', and I have campaigned about it,' I told them. 'Rehman Chishti, MP, also started a campaign to have the government refer to ISIS as Daesh, making this their official position. As I understand it, around 120 other MPs, including the Mayor of London, have also signed his letter requesting this, which the Prime Minister accepted. One of the senior supporters of this campaign has also been former chief of defence staff, General Lord Richards of Herstmonceux,' I added.

A third student, Ali, jumped in. 'I always hear through the media and many politicians that terrorism is created and propagated by the Mullahs and Madrassahs. If that is the case, then how many have been closed?' he asked, looking bewildered. 'I heard that there are seminary reform programmes going on in Pakistan, and that NGOs, supported by Western governments, were working with the Interior Minister Rehman Malik. I wonder what the result of that is? You must ask, how many Islamic seminaries have been reformed or closed in Pakistan and the UK as a result of terrorism charges, and how many Mullahs have been arrested under terrorism charges? Why is it that the West is attacking and demonising my religion? Madrassahs, mosques, and so-called Mullahs have been reporting people to the authorities, which causes problems for them in the community, but they still do it!'

I hear such questions quite often. As a matter of fact, they think I will pass their concerns to the right authorities, which may happen on occasions, but the youth cannot comprehend the scale of the problem that has been created out there, as many senior figures in government institutions seem to be helpless in addressing such international issues and their impact on local communities. Nonetheless, I replied to Ali, 'As a matter of fact, Islamic seminaries in Pakistan have the largest non-governmental, charitable, and educational network in the world. They provide free education, food, accommodation, etc. to hundreds of thousands of needy people. Of course, there are some rich people who would like their children to become qualified Islamic scholars rather than going into another career. We must not forget that jobs are guaranteed for these graduates where no other institution can provide this guarantee, but let us concentrate on the UK'.

'I was born and bred in the UK, studied in an Islamic school as well as in an Islamic seminary in London and now I am doing business and law. Madrassahs and Islamic schools are not a hotbed for terrorism or extremism as the media is portraying. They give us a place to educate ourselves, to learn and develop. The real centres of Jihad, or what the public refers to as training camps, were set up by our own western agencies led by the CIA. Hillary Clinton, the US presidential candidate, has said on record that the US led these kinds of activities to benefit the US. It is frustrating and it makes me angry when non-Muslims just throw all the blame on Madrassahs, Muslims, and Mullahs. We were never ever taught extremism, violent extremism, or terrorism there,' Ali interrupted.

He was referring to a speech where Hillary quite emphatically and unequivocally confirmed the US involvement in the creation of the Mujahideen. She said:

'Let's remember here that the people we are fighting here today, we funded twenty years ago. And we did it because we were locked in this struggle with the Soviet Union. They invaded Afghanistan and we did not want to see them control Central Asia and we went to work, and it was President Reagan in partnership with Congress, led by democrats, who said you know what... sounds like a pretty good idea, let's deal with the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence-Pakistani

intelligence agency) and the Pakistani military and let's go recruit these mujahideen. It's great. Let's get some to come from Saudi Arabia and other places, importing their Wahabi brand of Islam so that we can go beat the Soviet Union. And guess what? They retreated; they lost billions of dollars and it led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. So, there is a very strong argument which is: it wasn't a bad investment in the Soviet Union, but let's be careful what we sow because we will harvest, and we are now making up for a lot of lost time.'

Referring to this, an elderly gentleman leaning against one of the pillars says, 'I don't think so. Do you think America would admit to this? It isn't true.'

I said, 'Unfortunately, he is right. I have seen the video that this young man is referring to. History has a bad habit of repeating itself, though. It seems that the international leadership has not learnt any lessons from our shared history. They make these geopolitical decisions, and it affects the ordinary community at large on the ground while they live lavishly and under protection.'

The first young man, Mo, angrily retorted, 'Didn't our governments give these Syrian terrorists weapons and training, only for them to bite us in the backside? I can understand why people go to the extent they do; they see no other route to take.'

The statements of Prime Minister David Cameron and President Barack Obama supported the students claims. They, too, are on record that they were 'equipping and supporting ISIL. In fact, US President, Barack Obama, said, 'We are speeding up training of ISIL forces.'

American Senator Randal Paul said the following: 'Most of these people do not have the sophistication to make arms so they get the arms from other folks... we have been allies with ISIS in Syria.' He also said, 'US intervention in Libya strengthened ISIL. Right now, ISIS has a billion dollars' worth of US Humvees, they have a billion dollars in cash that they stole from us and pay their soldiers with, but they have anti-tank weapons and missiles they fire from the shoulder that were basically given to people in the Syrian civil war and taken by ISIS.' (Or were they handed over by the CIA?)

He continued, 'During the Libyan civil war, 15,000 shoulder-to-

air missiles made by the United States disappeared. That's why there is concern that airliners might be taken down by shoulder-to-air missiles. That might be a good reason for why we should've thought long and hard before we agreed to get involved in a war in Libya. Taking out Assad will only create a vacuum like the United States did in Iraq and Libya when it removed Saddam Hussein and Colonel Gaddafi from power.'

I calmed the young people by saying that I understood their concerns. 'Let me tell you one thing – these are not only your concerns. They have been raised by many people in the media, parliamentarians, academics, and senior Christian leaders, etc. on numerous occasions—'

I was interrupted again by another young student, Kaz. 'Unfortunately, today again, the very same so-called freedom fighters ISIS, supported by our governments, like they did in the case of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, have turned around to bite the hand that fed them. But the media outlets and politicians do not seem to be bothered about the turmoil that has been created due to the illegal attacks on other sovereign countries such as Iraq, Libya, and Syria.' He further mentioned that at one point, the British Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, had said during a live parliamentary session from the dispatch box, that there was 'an illegal invasion of Iraq' – which begs the question: Under what circumstances are terrorists are being created? Where is the real focal point of Jihad? Is it really the Madrassahs? Madrassahs cannot be providing state-of-the-art weapons such as stinger missiles and tanks, nor training to ISIL/ISIS.

Listening to these impassioned, politically charged youths, I was thinking of an answer to somehow satisfy such disaffected young people. Deep inside my heart, I knew that the references they were quoting were readily available. How can one deny the facts that world leaders have put on record? I could see what line of argument was going to come next. I really wanted the youths to stay engaged and vent their anger in front of me rather than going to the wrong kind of people and getting dragged into something dangerous.

'There seems to be a serious trust deficit between the corridors of power and young people like you, possibly borne out of a lack of opportunities and meaningful interaction. But perhaps there is

another side you have not considered? You are not the only people who have these views; as a matter of fact, there are millions of people who agree with you. There were millions of people worldwide taking part in peaceful demonstrations against the wars of Iraq, Libya, Syria, and others. It's evidence of a similar disenfranchisement – that the government is not listening to the public. Demonstrations are a healthy part of any democratic society. Have you been to any of these 'Anti-War' demonstrations?' I asked.

'No, what is that going to achieve? We need more than that – we need action,' Kaz replied.

'You will not only record your protest in these events, but you will also meet many non-Muslims who will have similar or stronger views than yours. You will begin to see that it is not everyone attacking you – it is difficult to discern who is against you because 'they' or 'non-Muslims' is a broad term. My point is that you have your democratic right to vent your anger by expressing yourself peacefully. But what are others doing? Their particular action... blowing themselves up and killing innocent people? That is not the right way, two wrongs do not make a right. You have an alternative available to you: take part in politics and work towards bringing change; I can introduce you to British politicians from all parties, arrange seminars with various embassies and representatives to engage with you on these issues so that you are sufficiently informed about the realities of the world. If you remember, almost two hundred British parliamentarians voted against the Iraq Invasion.

'Did you see these angry MPs or the demonstrators (Muslims and non-Muslims) picking up arms and going on a killing spree, and naming it as Jihad? So, firstly, as law abiding citizens, we need to work within the system that the state has developed and secondly, we need to learn what Jihad means.

'Many religious leaders I have spoken to in the UK and during my travels overseas have said they have a duty to ensure that they raise awareness about the true teachings of the Quran. Jihad, in the sense of struggle, is one of the most important teachings in Islam.

'The true meaning of Jihad has unfortunately been perverted. It was because of terrorists, the media and others hijacking the word *Jihad* that led me to write a book under the title *My Jihad* because we

needed to reclaim the very word. There are various forms of Jihad, the delineations of which are clear – the best form, which is vastly propagated and taught is Jihad against oneself, i.e., to fight your own desires and inner base form—'

Pulling out his phone, the young man interrupted: 'Those who educate about Jihad are simply using and echoing the words of the former President of the United States of America, Ronald Reagan, because he is the one that said:

'In making mention of freedom fighters Mujahideen, all of us are privileged to have in our midst tonight one of the brave commanders who led the Afghan freedom fighters... They are our brothers, these freedom fighters, and we owe them our help. They are the moral equal of our Founding Fathers and the brave men and women of the French Resistance. We cannot turn away from them, for the struggle here is not right versus left; it is right versus wrong.'

I chuckled since everything is available online nowadays. I suppose that one of the reasons why the elders may have had some difficulty in believing the Hillary Clinton statement was because if it they hadn't read it, it wasn't true.

I explained to them that many seminaries, state owned universities in Pakistan, and even many European institutions, educate people on the true meaning of Jihad (struggle) so that people are not led astray by the misappropriation of Islamic principles. The 'struggle' that President Reagan speaks about is the same Jihad that is a fundamental belief in Islam: the struggle of RIGHT versus WRONG. This struggle is what we equate to Jihad – unfortunately, the media is equating struggle/Jihad to terrorism; grossly erroneous on their part, and anyone else who chooses to do so. Some people say that Reagan was speaking about Nicaraguan rebels when equating freedom fighters to the American founding fathers – but the fact is that the Afghans and the Nicaraguans were freedom fighters, both held in high esteem, and both referred to by President Reagan in the same context.

Those who are old enough or well-read, remember when British forces went to war against Argentina over the Falkland Islands. The then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, said: 'I didn't go down there to negotiate. I went down there to get the Argentinians off and if they



left then we didn't need to go into battle.'

One will say that they went to get their piece of land back from the invaders. I am afraid this is also Jihad. It was her struggle (Jihad) of RIGHT versus WRONG.

The young man continued, 'So, this is the same Jihad that the Pakistani government, in partnership with the CIA, promoted among Muslim communities all over Pakistan, and supported in order for the West to remove the invaders (USSR) from Afghanistan. Disintegrating the former Russia had consequences; so the world saw this frequency of terrorism or suicide attacks in countries such as France, Belgium, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Pakistan, etc. Not until our governments interfered in these countries did the world see any of this terrorist activity.'

'British politicians are always talking about British values but at the same time demonising Islam and its followers. The reality is, in the words of Prime Minister, David Cameron, that British society is broken. His top priority was 'to mend our broken society'. For there to be a true believer, one must have complete conviction that his/her way of life is the best, all the while being open to debate and not demeaning the way of life of others. But if any Muslim says that Islam is basically a complete way of life and is therefore superior to any other way of life, he will be branded as an extremist and will be tried mercilessly by the media. This is even truer for preachers, be it of Islam, Christianity, or Judaism – just as Britain claims superiority over other nations because of its belief of having a better way of life due to its values. I met numerous Islamic leaders who visited the UK and always promoted peace, cohesion, and coexistence. These people do not get the time of day on media platforms, yet they give a platform to the likes of Anjem (Choudary) who does not represent us,' Adam said very enthusiastically. He then rushed off with his friends, having received an assurance from me to sit down and pick up the matter again the following Friday.

I started pondering upon the questions these young people had raised. I read an article by Martin Beckford in *The Telegraph* which showed that one of the country's top civil servants held a private summit with senior American, French, and German politicians, during which they decided to provide 'discreet support for Afghan

guerrilla resistance’.

One faction of the Mujahideen fighters, who were also being covertly funded by the CIA, went on to become founding members of the Al-Qaeda terrorist network. Everyone is aware of what impact this terrorist group has had on the world.

Martin Beckford further wrote in his article:

‘On January 15th, 1980, Sir Robert Armstrong, the Cabinet Secretary, met Zbigniew Brzezinski, the US National Security Advisor, along with government representatives from France and West Germany, at the Palais Marigny in Paris. A note sent to London afterwards stated, ‘There was some discussion of support for Afghan resistance to the invading Soviet troops’. In a restricted memo, Sir Robert told how the Americans suggested supporting refugee camps in Pakistan as they were being used as bases by guerrillas opposing the Soviet invasion, and it would ‘help to keep Afghan resistance alive’.

So long as they remained in forward positions, they would need some defensive equipment, possibly including surface-to-air missiles to defend themselves against air attack.

It was said at the meeting: ‘If one of the objectives of the West in this crisis was to keep the Islamic world aroused about the Soviet invasion, that would be served by encouraging a continuing guerrilla resistance.’

The Germans were legally unable to supply arms, but the US, UK and France agreed to help the Mujahideen.

It was agreed that heads of government should be invited to endorse this conclusion and, if they did so, to authorise discussions at the appropriate level with the agencies involved concerning feasibility and methods of providing discreet support for Afghan guerrilla resistance.’

He further said, ‘Soon afterwards, Dr Brzezinski visited Pakistan and wrote to the Cabinet Office: ‘I was impressed by the determination of the Pakistanis, and with the Afghan resistance fighters – the Mujahideen – whom I encountered during my visit to a refugee camp on the frontier.

‘I am convinced we have something solid to work with in frustrating Soviet ambitions toward the south.’

Muslims from around the world had travelled to Afghanistan to join the resistance and some Mujahideen veterans, including Osama bin Laden who had received weapons and training from Western powers, went on to use them against their former supporters in terrorist atrocities.

A simple fact remains: the UK has not seen any of its terrorists being trained and taught in Islamic seminaries or Madrassahs. They have all been attendees of private/public schools, colleges, and universities, as opposed to having studied in institutions of Islamic backgrounds. Several Islamic organisations, blamed for cultivating and harbouring this ideology, have in fact reported these very people to the police in order to protect the community at large. Many Muslims, friends and family have advised the relevant authorities about the activities taking place and radicalisation of an individual close to them – missed opportunities by the authorities to stop some of these acts.

Such claims fly in the face of conventional understanding of this menace. We all have a common enemy in these terrorists – they are against humanity and act indiscriminately. Rather than pointing fingers and making accusations, I hope that common sense prevails in this witch hunt. Terrorists are criminals; they may be Christians like the English young man, David Copeland, who carried out the Brixton bombing; an American ex-soldier, Timothy McVeigh, who carried out the Oklahoma bombing (1995), an Irish man, Martin McGuinness (convicted of IRA membership by the Republic of Ireland's Special Criminal Court in 1973 after being caught with a car containing 250lb (113kg) of explosives and nearly 5,000 rounds of ammunition), or a Jewish extremist who killed innocent gays in London, or Muslims such as Shehzad Siddique (7/7 London bombing). We must not forget a Norwegian far-right terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik, who also killed almost a hundred people. He was a right-wing 'crusader' who identified his hatred for multiculturalism and distributed it in a 1,500-page manifesto.

Omar Mir Seddique Mateen was a gay American who became a mass murderer, killing forty-nine people and wounding fifty-three others in a mass shooting at the Pulse gay bar in Orlando, Florida, due to self-hate. He was killed in a shoot-out with the local police by

another Muslim, Police officer Imran Yousuf.

As a society, we must move away from the labelling of criminals with their faith or background. This gives rise to hatred and demonisation of religion, including Islamophobia. If we do not, we may be creating a problem for ourselves by creating unsafe spaces for those Muslims who are moderate and do not share these values. Yet, they may be vulnerable enough to be misguided and taken down the wrong track.



# Rehabilitation of Extremists - Lessons Learnt from the UK?

“

*Hindsight is a wonderful thing,  
but foresight is better, especially  
when it comes to saving life, or  
some pain!*

”

William Blake

*“... the CIA, once achieving its goal of collapsing the USSR, abandoned the Pakistani and Afghan forces and left them without any infrastructure or rebuilding initiatives. Instead, it left them with the military arsenal and a warped mentality. The impact of this war continues to plague Pakistan today with the menace of terrorism and international society in the current struggle between the Western liberal democratic order and extremism under the banner of so called ‘Islam.’”*



I finished my meeting with the Christian Community led by Rt. Rev. Peter Humphries, the Bishop of Peshawar, after the despicable terrorist attack on a church in Peshawar. I was gutted from what I heard, but I was also hopeful. Although this attack had been carried out by so-called Muslims, I was happy to hear that some of the first people on the scene to help, were Muslims who were either neighbours or Muslims passing by. But I had two questions in my mind following this dialogue: 1) what community-led preventative and rehabilitative measures for violent extremists are available in Pakistan? and 2) what lessons could be learnt from the UK?

These questions played on my mind as I watched the world pass me by on the drive to the home of Rt. Rev. Alexander John Malik, the Bishop of Lahore. He had invited me to his residence as there was unrest among the Christian communities in Pakistan, having been targeted by terrorists whereas they had been peaceful members of society, just like their fellow Muslims. They also had a particularly good working relationship with the majority Muslim community in Pakistan, but this did not help matters. During my time in Lahore, I was invited to meet with the Christian leadership to support them in their idea and I also had a chance to meet with the Head of Churches of Pakistan, Bishop Azaria, who brought with him other members of the different Christian communities residing in Lahore. Bishop Jamil Irfan of Lahore also invited me to a dinner meeting and expressed his concern regarding these isolated incidents of violence against Christians. Most of the people I met with, were of the view that some unseen forces were trying to create anarchy in the country to sabotage the working relationship among the various strands of the Pakistani community.

I also met with my friend and ex-Defence Secretary of Pakistan, General (R) Athar Ali, who had spoken at the Future of Pakistan Conference arranged by FIRD. He had a unique insight about this menace of terrorism. He was of the view that there were foreign actors involved in recruiting people to carry out this violent project in Pakistan. He connected it to the Afghan Jihad that was carried out by the CIA-led coalition against the former USSR. He said that neighbouring countries were paying off people in dollars to smuggle



themselves into Pakistan to commit terrorism, and so communities should keep this in mind when making judgements. He referred to various instances of the capture and/or killing of foreign nationals related to terrorist events. I strongly expressed the view that I could understand the unknown fear the Christian community had but that we should assure them that they would not be left on their own at this exceedingly difficult time. General Ali said that people were cautious when we khaki folk became involved and surmised that it would only compound the situation for them to give assurances. So, I suggested that due to my established connections in religious circles, I would speak to senior Islamic Scholars in Pakistan and encourage them to form an effective consultative and monitoring group to curb this wave of heinous crime against Christians. Before I met the Islamic Scholars, I carried out some research and found out that the entire country was under siege: schools, colleges, universities, mosques, shrines, churches, police, army... everyone was a target of terrorists. The wide range of targets pointed the finger strongly towards an external force with internal support and was very active to create anarchy to destabilise Pakistan politically and economically. I proposed that there be two levels to the consultative approach for it to work successfully: a) an official group of individuals from all religious backgrounds to lobby on behalf of any case found to be genuine and b) an unofficial group who could be part of Track II dialogue initiatives, which would include religious, media, military, civilian, NGO and community personnel. For this to work, I asked for the groups to show solidarity and avoid making the issues football frenzy.

Our discussions revolved around understanding terrorism and its cures. One must not forget that root causes and drivers of radicalisation/extremism keep changing at a very fast pace, given the changes that society goes through. This is important because for any rehabilitative measure, the causes must be identified and understood to be addressed effectively. Measures through preventative and diversionary programmes in tackling people who are disenfranchised, radicals and extremists in Pakistan must be encouraged by the state through community leadership. I proposed that Pakistan must examine the rehabilitation models and policies

carried out to reform violent extremists and terrorists in the UK once they have committed, or are conspiring to commit, an act of terrorism. A comprehensive analysis must be undertaken, and although the data found on Pakistan's rehabilitative systems is limited, a comparative scrutiny of data must be pursued.

Given my first-hand experience of devising and executing such programmes in the United Kingdom at various intervals from 2004 to 2015 as preventative/rehabilitative/diversionary/training programmes in the UK, I suggested to various stakeholders that they should:

Identify the root causes and drivers of extremism in Pakistan (i.e., what causes one to become an extremist?).

Assess the rehabilitation mechanisms in Pakistan and in the UK.

Assess restraints in implementing diversionary and rehabilitative programmes in Pakistan.

Analyse the UK's model in preventing and countering radicalisation and extremism.

Make use of already tried and tested UK models in Pakistan.

Propose model/s for countering Radicalisation, Extremism, and Rehabilitation.

So far, there has been little information by way of substantial research on the community-led management of the rehabilitation process for extremists and terrorists in Pakistan. Community-led rehabilitative initiatives have not been tried at national level in Pakistan; therefore, research being conducted, or models being used are not available as compared to the UK. Nonetheless, government-led initiatives such as the programme of the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of the Punjab province of Pakistan were launched to de-radicalise and rehabilitate former Jihadi and militant elements in collaboration with the Technical and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) through technical and vocational training. Another rehabilitation programme called Sabaoon, supervised by the Pakistan Army is being run in the Sawat valley of Pakistan, and has a civilian element.

Much of the literature and research related to rehabilitation work in Pakistan only examines the root causes or drivers of extremism and radicalisation, such as the foreign policies of western states, state

funded extremism, radical preachers in the Madrassahs (Islamic boarding schools), poverty, absence of rule of law and the geo-political position of Pakistan; that is, the country's sensitive location in sharing borders with Afghanistan, the strong hold of the Taliban, where their ideology has spilled over into Pakistan, which has led to increased extremism and hence another splinter movement, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.



In 2010, the National Coordinator for Counter Terrorism, The Hague, Netherlands, published a book called *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives*, in which Sarah Marsden and I jointly wrote a chapter under the title: *Furthering the Counter-Narrative via Educational and Social Grassroots Projects*. We emphasised that, if the attempt to engage with extremism is considered a state-led, top-down initiative, it has much less chance of success. Empowered, community-led work is needed to increase the chances of success.

Furthermore, in much of the research on extremism related matters in Pakistan, the role of civil society has been mentioned only for consultation and monitoring, or when things go wrong. There is a limited proactive approach in dealing with *bona fide* grassroots level organisations. On the other hand, parts of the community have limited themselves and created a self-imposed boundary of action and response on the side lines, rather than taking a leading role in countering and preventing extremism or rehabilitating terrorists. Such self-imposed exclusion from this responsibility is perhaps the underlying reason for the lack of innovation in countering extremism and rehabilitating violent extremists.

Despite 9/11, there had not been any significant impact on the area of radicalisation as it had not hit close to home. However, after Europe experienced a spate of terrorist incidents in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), the term 'radicalisation' was introduced heavily in academic and governmental discussions. Other terms such as

violent radicalisation, counter-radicalisation, de-radicalisation etc. were often referred to in many academic and political discourses. De-radicalisation, disengagement and social reintegration could not be considered out of the context of their precursor, radicalisation. According to some researchers including Horgan, radicalisation is a social and psychological process of an incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology. At the same time, the establishment across Europe has used the term radicalisation in place of terrorism very loosely and interchangeably. Examples of the varied understandings of radicalisation/extremism are given below and demonstrate the hindrance to grasping a basic concept of this process.

According to Wilner and Dubouloz, radicalism is a thought process that makes people believe in a totally different approach to solve social and political problems than the masses. A *radical* is someone who believes in extreme social and political solutions that are not shared by a majority in a community.

In CONTEST, the British counter terrorism strategy, the government defines radicalisation as *the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and extremist ideologies associated with terrorist groups*.

The Prevent Strategy further notes that, 'Radicalisation is driven by an ideology which sanctions the use of violence'.

Therefore, extremism can be defined as 'activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary', stretching something to its limits or to its extremes. What is ordinary and what is extremist may be one's subjective views or actions in a political, religious, or economic sense which are outside the generally acceptable attitudes of mainstream society. Once again, mainstream society norms differ from region to region.

The understanding of an extremist, amongst South Asian academics, is similar to a degree, but has some major differences. Some academics view extremists as those who hold 'uncompromising political and religious views'. This is probably where the problem lies as no Muslim will be willing to 'compromise' his/her religious beliefs.

Extremist individuals or organisations attached to extremism may

have completely different ideologies but will share many common characteristics. As an example, economist Ronald Wintrobe puts forward some of the common characteristics between 'Jewish fundamentalists' and 'the extremists of Hamas':

- I. Both are against any compromise with the other side.
- II. Both are entirely sure of their position.
- III. Both advocate and sometimes use violence to achieve their ends.
- IV. Both are nationalistic.
- V. Both are intolerant of dissent within their group.
- VI. Both demonise the other side.

Features of extremists continue in other fashions too. For example, they will often be involved in criminal activities and have a limited scope of success in life. So, the way we define and identify radicalisation is extremely important.

Looking at psychology, the **Social-Cognitive Theory of Radicalisation** dictates that: 1) radicalisation at a cognitive level shifts moral priorities where politically motivated violent activities take precedence over other virtues, overriding other obligations; 2) the term cognitive dissonance can be used to define and explain the gradual change in beliefs etc. of a person; 3) the term vicarious cognitive dissonance (observing of another individual being dissonant) explains how the process of radicalisation can operate through networks.

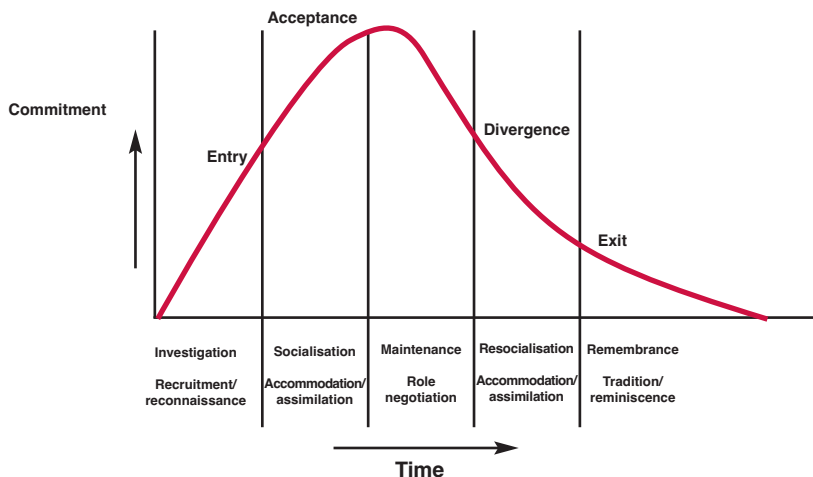
In comparison, the **Social Movement and Social Network Theory** emphasises that radicalisation is a social process particularly prevalent in small groups, where otherwise considered, being relationships that are fundamental to understanding why they move to terrorist acts. Group bonding, peer pressure and indoctrination are necessary social factors for radicalisation, and to encourage the view that violence is a legitimate response to perceived injustice.

## Root Causes: Internationalisation

There are number of psychological, social, and economic factors that may put someone on the path of radicalism or extremism, depending upon the situation one may be in. It may be due to discrimination, racism, lack of opportunities (in education and employment), disagreement on political issues (foreign policies of governments), etc. It may also be demonisation or persistent attacks on one's religion or culture, leaving psychological scars on the person who may not be able to vent his/her anger in any shape or form. Therefore, internalising that anger makes that person feel disenfranchised, thus leading to a hate element – a very powerful factor that all the extremists have in common. In those countries where one person loses numerous family members, friends or members of the community, their psychological status will be entirely different from an ordinary radical or an extremist, thus leading such kinds of extremists to the suicidal terrorist attack – the extreme side of terrorism.

Some of the above factors are echoed in a white paper, *Addressing Extremism* by Dr. Peter T. Coleman: '... adverse conditions (poverty, inadequate access to healthcare, nutrition, education, and employment), a denial of basic human needs (for security, dignity, group identity, and political participation), unending experiences of humiliation, and an ever-widening gap between what people believe they deserve and what they can attain, leads to extreme acts. This is particularly so because normative channels for getting needs met are experienced as blocked'. Therefore, one could take extreme measures to vent or channel his/her anger due to persistent experiences of oppression, discrimination, insecurity, humiliation, racism, resentment, etc.

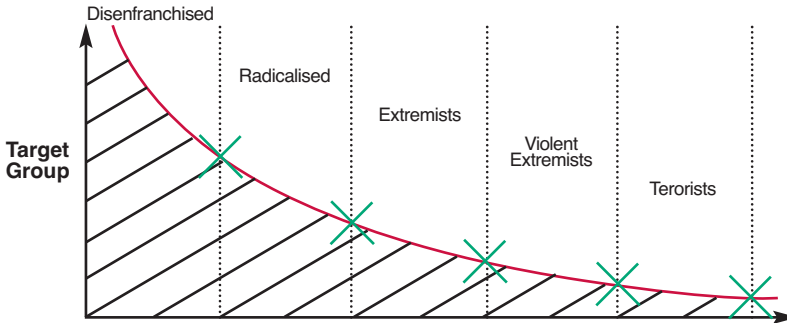
A model of the psychological process which individuals go through in forming a shared identity with extremisms is that of Moreland and Levine (1982) in figure 1.



**Figure 1: Model of group socialisation Moreland and Levine (1982).**

An interesting model was proposed by the Forum for International Relations Development (FIRD), in partnership with Stockwell Green Community Services (SGCS) and School of Economics and Law (SOEL). During the *Future of Pakistan Conference*, workshops with delegates were held and following this, they proposed the model depicting the stages and process of radicalisation; an outcome of interviews and focus groups. This is exhibited below, and it enunciates at least five stages stretching from the stage of disenchantment/disaffection (stage 1) through radicalisation (stage 2), to extremism (stage 3), to violent extremism (stage 4) and ultimately terrorism (stage 5). This was adapted earlier by the SEED project of SGCS, the organisation I chair. The FIRD conference focus groups revealed broad agreement with the initial five stages, but the revised new model highlights further issues to be considered at each stage.

## Early Prevention Model



**Figure 2: Early Prevention Model**

One can see that the 'Level of Threat' in figure 2 is reciprocal to the number of people in 'Target Groups'. The number of 'Disenfranchised', 'Radicals' and 'Extremists' is far higher than the 'violent Extremists' and 'Terrorists'. If the green crosses are taken as 'Rehabilitation Blocks' to prevent each category of people from entering the next one, the problem can be addressed and prevented at a very early stage. Further root causes and preventative measures need to be developed for a successful model.

Another model of containment can be developed further. To contain the problem of extremism, keeping it in a triangular system formed by the community as the lead partner/angles and the local authority and local police being the remaining two angles. If any of the angles is broken, the problem will spread, and counter radicalisation work will be hampered. Therefore, the partners must be in direct communication with one another to disengage the subject from external influences.



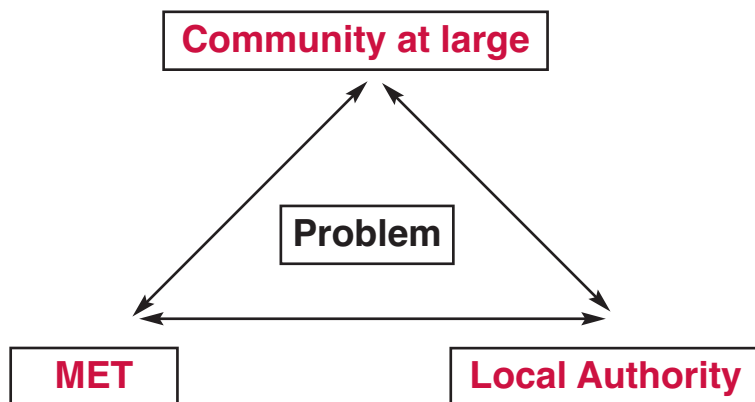


Figure 3: The Triangular Model of Containment

## Rehabilitation:

According to researchers Gunaratna and Ali, rehabilitation is a process that extricates an ideology embedded in someone's mind. Veldhuis opines that the main objective of rehabilitation for violent extremists is to prepare inmates for their transition back into mainstream society. It should include aspects of both de-radicalisation and disengagement for their successful reintegration.

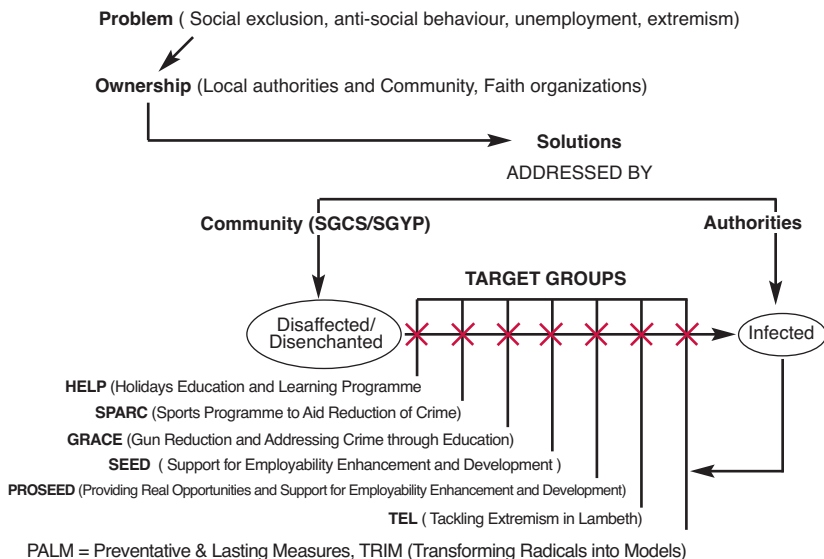
Gunaratna and Rubin further note that in some cases, the rehabilitation of suspected and convicted terrorists has enabled them to express remorse for their violent ideologies and to re-engage with mainstream society. Rehabilitation depends on the nature of a crime committed and the mental state of the offender. The rehabilitation process of an extremist will be different from that of a terrorist, and it will differ if the offender was a failed suicide bomber. For a terrorist, before the rehabilitation programme starts, a thorough assessment is needed. That may involve psychological assessment, risk assessment for the offender and the rehabilitator/s, etc.

Fakhar says, 'Pakistan has rehabilitation initiatives, but the Sabaoon Centre for Rehabilitation is the only 'civilian-run

programme' in close collaboration with the Pakistan Army operating in Swat, KPK province of Pakistan. It is widely known that it had a military stamp on it. Dr Mohammad Farooq (assassinated in October 2010 by the Taliban), Vice-Chancellor of the Islamic university of Swat, enrolled eighty of the former Taliban militants in Sabaoon where he and other experts tried to 'de-programme' them by offering them basic psychosocial therapies alongside educational and physical activities.

Horgan puts it thus: 'At present, there is a flurry of activity worldwide aimed at what, on the surface, appears to be a pursuit of similar objectives, but upon closer inspection reveals such diverse conceptual underpinnings that they can only realistically be unified in terms of promoting some kind of move away from terrorism.' Handling radicals is profoundly splintered, and de-radicalisation is very personal.

The following process which I have used for counter extremism and rehabilitation can be transformed into a model for de-radicalisation as well as rehabilitation. Firstly, it starts with identification of the problem, which may involve assessing the nature and scale of the problem. Secondly, ownership of the problem either by the community or the statutory bodies. Thirdly, the diversionary, preventative, and counter radicalisation projects (red blocks) stop the disenchanting groups from entering the circle of those infected by the virus of violence. Fourthly, the convicted violent extremists and terrorists are released on parole to engage with the community-led rehabilitative initiatives and giving the subjects a very clear exit strategy.



**Figure 4: Ownership model of partnership for rehabilitation**

**EXIT STRATEGY**

- Entering into Mainstream Society
- Accredited Education
- Accredited employability enhancement training
- Volunteering
- Employment
- Enterprise
- Role models

**Figure 5: Exit model for the offenders through rehabilitation**

One factor that is shared commonly among terrorists is the feeling of alienation, whether real or perceived in economic, social, political, or psychological terms. Therefore, the rehabilitation programme may include religious/social mentoring, education/training, challenging narratives, health, and sports, etc. Moreover, apart from the offender, the rehabilitation of the offender's family is equally important. The suffering the parents, brothers, sisters, and children go through is enormous and has an immense psychological as well physical impact. The parents of one family I worked with showed serious physical health deterioration following their ordeal. They also fell under severe mental strain and emotional heartbreak, not knowing where their child was or what had happened to him. The children of another individual I rehabilitated showed serious emotional trauma stemming from missing their father. In another case, friends expressed concern about keeping in touch with someone convicted of terrorism because they thought that police and intelligence agencies would be spying on them simply because of the association.

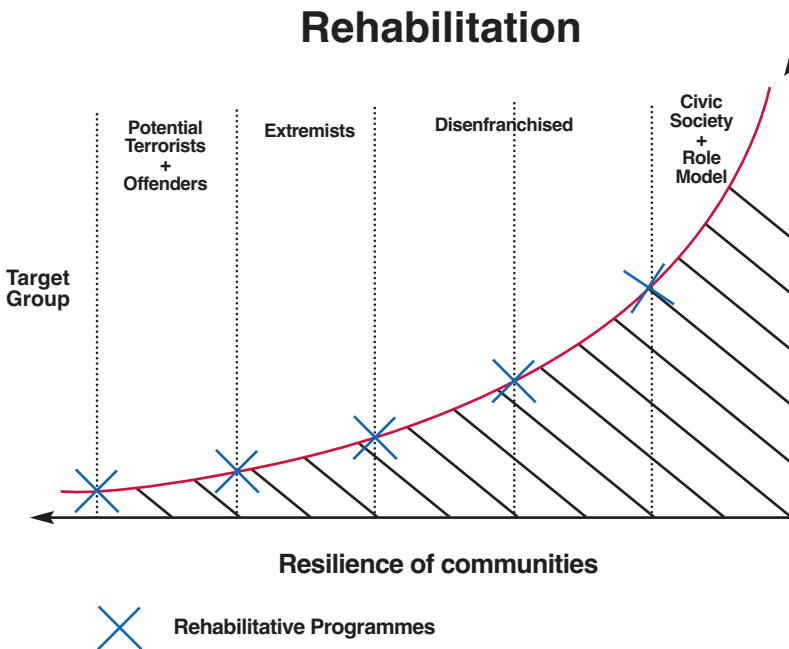


Figure 6: Community resilience model



## **Pakistan in context: The Nature and scale of the problem**

Pakistan has lost more than 50,000 civilians in the war on terror. It has been on the front line of protecting the region and various other parts of the world. It has suffered losses in terms of military personnel too, with some estimates reaching 6000. Through being thrust into the war on terror, Pakistan has taken some serious hits. There are numerous conflicting figures available about the losses Pakistan has suffered. Some people say total fatalities in Terrorist Violence in Pakistan from 2003 to 2016 were 61,334 detailing as follows: Civilians (21,414), Security Force Personnel (6,643), Terrorists (33,277).

In addition to this, it also has the highest number of proscribed Islamic organisations and, according to some, the number of convicted terrorists is in the thousands. The federal government and its four provincial counterparts have drawn up lists of which prisoners would be sent to the gallows. Initial estimates have put the number of convicted terrorists awaiting execution at more than 3000. (Hussain, 2014).

According to the Interior Ministry of Pakistan, in 2015 alone, 1,113 incidents of terrorism took place in the country while 637 terrorists were killed and 710 were arrested. (GEO News, 2015).

In the UK, 69 out of 70 international terrorist organisations proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000 have Islamic identity and nine organisations have links with Pakistan. Fourteen organisations in Northern Ireland were proscribed under previous legislation.

According to the US State Department, 37 out of 61 foreign organisations designated have Islamic identity.

## Background

Pakistan came into existence when British rule over India ended in 1947, dividing it into two parts: India and Pakistan. Both new born countries entered a war over the princely state of Kashmir straight after the partition. This is still a bone of contention between the two behemoths; occupied Kashmir ruled by India has been facing a continuous struggle by the Kashmiris for independence supported by Pakistan. It has long been said that Kashmir should be given the right to choose their own fate, but this has not been achieved. Subsequently both countries had two more major wars (in 1965 and 1971) and many skirmishes on the borders e.g., the Kargil conflict in 1999. Such hostility between both countries has created extremist trends not only in the public domain but also within state institutions; politicians and media are not behind in this race. Both countries are very advanced in nuclear arms and have not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). State institutions deliberately target the public's thought process to promote religious extremists. In both countries, very senior military officials have been dismissed and charged with terrorism offences.

## The Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and the Invasion of Afghanistan

Another twist in the story of Pakistan that changed its demography was when the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) invaded Afghanistan in the 1980's. This was the time when world forces banded together to stop the former USSR from having access to the hot water of the Arabian Sea. This invasion was termed an assault on religion by people of no faith and so this 'Cold' War was turned into a 'Religious' war by the United States. Another partner was sought in this effort. A partner that had just as much religious zeal and backbone to fight. This partner, perhaps naïve at the time, given that it was newly created, was Pakistan, riding the wave of religious patriotism. An aspect of Pakistan's religious

identity was taken advantage of: Jihad. It was such Jihad that was launched to defeat the 'godless communism' threat.

Cooley described the operation, and its dogma in this way: Virtually all would be Muslim. They would fervently believe that God had commanded them to fight his enemies, the Godless Communists, and foreign Russian invaders. Their earthly rewards would be glory and generous pay. For those who died as martyrs, their reward would be in heaven.

To impress the Islamic circles of the Islamic world, the 'godly' relationship between the Abrahamic faiths was exploited against the ungodly 'Red Bear'. Hence, a vast number of Mujahideen were recruited from all over the world and trained in the training centres set up by the CIA and Pakistani intelligence agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). As a result, the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic was disintegrated. As I have noted before, the CIA, once achieving its goal of collapsing the USSR, abandoned the Pakistani and Afghan forces and left them without any infrastructure or rebuilding initiatives. Instead, it left them with the military arsenal and a warped mentality. The impact of this war continues to plague Pakistan today, with the menace of terrorism and international society in the current struggle between the Western liberal democratic order and extremism under the banner of so called 'Islam'. It also placed Pakistan under a great burden of three Million refugees.

The international leadership withdrew from effectively supporting the Mujahideen to become an integral part of the regular Afghan army. They rather left them in the lurch, leading Afghanistan down a path of complete anarchy and a power vacuum. What Afghanistan needed, more than at any other time during the war, was foreign support. Yet, the United States, its Cold War won – its mission complete – lost interest in Afghanistan in the years when its interest was most needed.

After 1989, American military and economic support to Afghanistan dramatically decreased, and no provisions were made for rebuilding the nation, demobilising fighters, or organising relief aid. The Afghans, rightly so, felt abandoned.

'To many Afghans', Ahmed Rashid writes in his book, *Taliban*, 'the US withdrawal constituted a major betrayal, while Washington's

refusal to harness international pressure to help broker a settlement between the warlords was considered a double betrayal.' The absence of the US had the effect of leaving a major power vacuum, creating a situation which lent itself to more chaos, destruction, and in-fighting amongst Afghanistan's many warlords, who, all out to consolidate their own individual power, proved unable to unite. Ultimately, the Taliban emerged as an alternative force to bring peace, at least to some extent, in a torn Afghanistan.

The hot waters of Arabian Sea and terrorism are linked in such a way that the Pakistan Army is now fighting against terrorists to make sure that China reaches the hot water of the Arabian Sea through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the \$48 Billion project. Russia has had two naval exercises in Pakistan's hot waters, 'Arabian Monsoon – 2014' and 'Arabian Monsoon – 2015.'

## **Official counter terrorism structure in Pakistan**

A federal organisation, the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), was established in Pakistan to collate intelligence, and to counter terrorism and extremism. This department was considered toothless and did not achieve any positive results because of the disagreement between the political parties. One friend close to the department said that that no party was willing to put its ego to the side for the betterment of the nation, despite pressure from a cross section of governmental bodies. NACTA was disabled from performing its key functions – a vehicle without a driver.

Pakistan, being badly hit by extremists and terrorists, has its army at the forefront of dealing with these people on both fronts: military operations to remove them from the homeland, and rehabilitation of terrorists. Their rehabilitation comprises of religion, education, and psychiatry.

On December 16, 2014, a heinous terrorist attack took place at the Army Public School, Peshawar, by Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in retaliation for Pakistan's recent military operations against the TTP that began in the summer of 2014. This tragedy brought the entire



nation together against terrorists and many of those who had a positive view of the plight of the terrorists, no longer felt it plausible to support them. Hence, the parliament passed a comprehensive National Action Plan (NAP) that was then owned by the army and started proactively targeting terrorist organisations and individuals. Some of the twenty points of the National Action Plan involve setting up special trial courts, no Militant outfits, strict action against hate-literature, choking financing for terrorist, a ban on glorification of terrorism, revamping and reforming the criminal justice system, but strikingly, there was no mention of a rehabilitation mechanism for violent extremists or terrorists, nor any mention of ownership or community-led initiatives for rehabilitation. A shift in the mentality of the Pakistani government became clear: no rehabilitation was necessary, just the hunting down, imprisonment or death of terrorists. I spoke to senior members of the four main parties in Pakistan and urged them to change their approach. I advised them to make provision for rehabilitation within their manifesto for the upcoming elections and to explore the matter with the British, Danish and Saudis. These three countries have a tried and tested approach to rehabilitation.

## **Probation system**

In Pakistan, theoretically, a probation framework exists but due to no systematic programme of rehabilitation and a shortage of probation and parole officers, it has no capacity to play an effective role in the rehabilitation of ordinary prisoners, never mind the hard-core criminals or terrorists. It is a well-known fact that the level of radicalism or extremism of a person is determined by the nature of his/her level of views or actions concerning social, political, or religious matters. Therefore, the collective ownership by the people from these circles is imminent and paramount i.e., the resilience from the social sector, vision from the political parties and responsibility from the religious and civic communities will enable community-led initiatives to be successful in partnership with the statutory bodies such as the probation service. Under the Offenders Ordinance 1960,

some of the duties of a probation officer towards the probationer include to: 'explain the conditions of probation orders, endeavour to find suitable employment for him/her, encourage every probationer to make use of statutory or voluntary organisations for his/her welfare', but no emphasis is placed on probation providing rehabilitation of an extremist or terrorist. The justice system needs to be reformed to place rehabilitation as an utmost priority during the sentencing of terrorists.

## Learning from UK experience

Terrorism itself is not a new phenomenon for the British government or its people. In Northern Ireland, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) led an armed struggle, seeking an end to British rule in Northern Ireland. Their struggle ran from 1969 until 1997 which involved murder, bombings, and other criminal enterprises. The IRA started bombing multiple locations in England to 'take the heat off Belfast and Derry' in 1973. In the 80s, the Provisional IRA had successfully added to their artillery of modern weaponry, including heavy machine guns, surface-to-air missiles, and rocket-propelled grenades. Most importantly, they had found a use for the plastic explosive, Semtex; in their pursuit of freedom and the overthrow of the British government, the IRA killed hundreds of innocent people via numerous terrorist attacks.

According to the Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN), a research project at the University of Ulster, 'the Provisional IRA was responsible for the deaths of 1,823 people during the Troubles up to 2001. Of that figure, 1,013 (55.5%) were members or former members of the British security forces'.

In the year ending June 2016, 182 persons were arrested for international terrorism; there were 165 persons in custody for both terrorism-related (152) and domestic extremism/separatism (13) offences and 62 trials completed; out of which 54 (87%) were convicted. (Home Office Quarterly update, Sep 2016).

The 7/7 London attacks really shook the government as well as the ordinary public, including the Muslims who also died on that day. British institutions like the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Police, Home Office, Local and Communities Department and Local Authorities reached out to the communities and started a consultation process. During the Labour government, there was much work at grassroots level to engage with the Muslim community. Unfortunately, this stopped when the Conservative government came in. When I met with Theresa May, I urged her to engage with the Muslim community at a grassroots level and work with individuals who had community credibility to tackle the issue of radicalisation.

## **Specific counter terrorism strategy in the UK**

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre, in early 2003, to coordinate the pan-Governmental response to the emerging terrorist threat, the British Government developed its first counter-terrorism strategy, known as CONTEST.

In March 2008, the Government published the UK's first National Security Strategy (NSS), subtitled Security in an interdependent world. The purpose of the NSS was stated as being 'to set out how we will address and manage this diverse though interconnected set of security challenges and underlying drivers, both immediately and in the longer term, to safeguard the nation, its citizens, our prosperity and our way of life'.

The strategic context of CONTEST involved aims including to reduce the risk to the UK and its interests overseas from terrorism so that people can go about their lives freely and with confidence. CONTEST deals with all forms of terrorism and continues to be based around four strands:

- I. Pursue: to stop terrorist attacks;
- II. Prevent: to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism;

- III. Protect: to strengthen our protection against a terrorist attack;
- IV. Prepare: to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack.

Under the PREVENT strand, the Office of Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT) works closely with Muslim-led preventative initiatives to prevent and divert vulnerable people from falling into the wrong hands or reoffending. I was also consulted regarding engagement with the Muslim community as I had been already running a counter radicalisation programme since 2002. In fact, the Prevent strategy required trust between Muslim communities and the criminal justice agencies as a prerequisite for successful counter-extremist work. Without this trust, there is little hope of fostering effective partnerships and even less hope of identifying extremists and potential extremists in the community with the help of local partners. It also linked the NOMS with such organisations that had the capacity and skills to rehabilitate extremists and those who were charged, convicted and jailed under terrorism legislation. The process was owned by not only the Probation services. The community organisation involved in the process was equally responsible for the offender who was released from prison with certain conditions such as:

- I. Would not leave the country;
- II. Would not contact co-offenders;
- III. Inform the authorities if moving from an existing address, changing a phone number, car, etc.

Occasionally, criticism is levelled against the Prevent programme of the Office of Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT), the PALM (Preventative and Lasting Measures) project and many others, who are wonderful examples of success where OSCT, Police, NOMS, London Probation Trust, Lambeth Council and the Stockwell Green Community Services (SGCS, a Muslim-led counter extremism and de-radicalisation NGO) successfully rehabilitated TACT-related offenders in partnership with the Khatme Nubuwwat Centre (KNC) also known as Stockwell Mosque.

In the absence of meaningful and active engagement of Muslim communities, long-term risks will be much higher as far as in-house terrorism is concerned. Benedict Wilkinson also echoes the community's role: 'The success of Prevent pivots on the successful collaboration of government, local partners and local communities in providing targeted counter-extremist initiatives within the community.' According to Probation, risk assessment and management of terrorism related offenders on licence in the UK, seventy offenders completed their licence in the community by February 2011, thirty-six TACT and thirty-four more in 2015.

Under Prevent, the police create and maintain dialogue with local communities to foster strong relationships; enhance knowledge of the array of demographic differences within and between Muslim communities; and use the knowledge and relationship acquired to identify people at risk of radicalisation. Risk assessment is negotiated by the probation service in co-operation with the police, the Prison Service and other Prevent partners, and shapes the drafting of 'bespoke' licence conditions to which the offender must adhere to complete his or her sentence in the community. I remember when two TACT related offenders who were being rehabilitated at our Centre were going to be recalled because they had supposedly broken their licence conditions. This violation was just two weeks before the expiry of their licence. I believed that recalling the individuals at this juncture, when they were about to complete their parole successfully in two weeks' time, would have a terribly negative impact on them. I believed that their violation, which was a wave to each other whilst stopped at opposite sides of a traffic light, did not warrant the call back to the prison by the authorities. The call back would only serve to demolish the foundation which we had been creating for two years. Therefore, my intervention and the timely support of the Probation Service encouraged the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) to change their mind – they realised that a degree of flexibility and looking at ground realities would be much more helpful to them in the long run, as opposed to following the rigidity of their policies.

Here again, the training package designed by SGCS and others in

2009 under European funded projects called Towards Preventing Violent Radicalisation (TPVR) and Reducing Influences that Radicalise Prisoners (RIRP) through the London Probation Trust was rolled out throughout London and other parts of the country. It was effectively used to train not only the probation staff, but also staff for high security prisons and other agencies. The training package focused on an inclusive and rounded approach rather than focusing on one strand of rehabilitation.

By late 2009, it was clear that a change in government was pending. Having spoken to several senior officers across the agencies, the signal was clear: community led rehabilitation and grassroots funding was going to be cut and instead a new formula was going to be implemented to tackle radicalisation. Instead of working with credible organisations, the new government strategy was to work with a select few organisations to stem the tide. Unfortunately, this strategy failed miserably and coupled with other agendas of the government, led to a major spike in radicalisation and terrorist activity.

Much of the work of the previous government had been largely ignored or discarded. The conservative government had a radical agenda that was hostile to immigrants, Muslims, black and minority ethnic groups, refugees, those on benefits, etc. This led to an increase in far-right extremists coming out of hiding as well. They were emboldened. The increase in far-right extremism has been largely ignored with the focus on the Muslim community. I have warned on numerous occasions of the rise of far-right radical groups like EDL, Britain First, National Action and others becoming the unknown domestic threat, just as far right nationalist groups are in the United States.

Finally, the menace of terrorism is not going away soon as radicalisation is fast spreading. Unless the root causes of radicalisation are identified and addressed without prejudice; it will breed more and more terrorism.



## Ending Note

When I think of my life and my past, it all seems like a dream. The dream where, in the first stage, I see a young, introverted boy running in the streets of Village 444 GB, who enters the engineering profession and then moves on to become an ageing man climbing the hill of life in Bradford. In the final stage of his life, the same frightened man walking on thin ice has grown into a confident man, who contributed towards British society and is now walking towards the Queen of England, accepting his MBE honour in recognition of his services to the community.

Isn't it nothing less than a dream?

A dream that I would never wish to be woken up from.

Could I have asked for more from my Creator? I don't think so.

I have received far more than I could have asked for.

I had my parents, who prayed day and night for my success.

I am blessed with a caring wife who has always stood by me at every stage of life despite my shortcomings; an amazing family who have proved to be my strength, and a group of dedicated and loyal friends who helped me to realise my dreams and ambitions both in England and Pakistan.

Dreams and ambitions, I always thought, were difficult but not impossible. Because as Francois de La Rochefoucauld famously said: *Nothing is impossible; there are ways that lead to everything, and if we had sufficient will, we should always have sufficient means. It is often merely for an excuse that we say things are impossible.*

And so, the story of dreams continues...

**Toaha Qureshi, MBE**



