

MEET THE CHALLENGE, MAKE THE CHANGE

A call to action for Muslim civil society in Britain

Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari

CORDOBA PAPERS • VOL2 • ISSUE 1 • MAY 2013

ISSN 2045-7030



مؤسسة قرطبة

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to a number of people among friends and colleagues, for their invaluable insights, comments and suggestions. They are quite a few and I have not mentioned their names. May Allah give them ample reward for their contributions to this paper.

Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

06 **PREFACE - DR ANAS ALTIKRITI**

INTRODUCTION

010 **CURRENT CONDITION OF BRITISH MUSLIMS**

An overview of key Muslim activist groups

Some major concerns (or *Shikwa*)

019 **THE WAY FORWARD**

The need for a 'big picture' vision

Muslim civil society

Excelling in knowledge, skills and character

Producing worthy leaders

Learning the art of politics and communication

033 **SETTING PRIORITIES**

Muslim 'community' organisations

Leadership styles

Organisational models and culture

036 **CONCLUSION**



DR ANAS ALTIKRITI

PREFACE

This paper comes at a timely moment.

The 'Muslim question' remains one of the most pertinent on the local and national scenes as well as on the international front.

The rise of political Islamic parties in one of the most important and volatile regions of the world, contrasting the rise of far-right anti-Muslim voices in the West, presents an array of questions on the place of politically and socially-'active' Islam throughout the East and West.

Analysts, commentators and experts have been busy attempting to map events and draw conclusions, and whilst most have been wide of the mark, the emerging conclusion is that the issue of political or resurgent Islam is and will continue to be of utmost importance and concern for the foreseeable future.

A fascinating revelation was that many of the leaders of the new Arab countries previously lived in Western countries as exiled figures. Many had actually gained prominence and developed their intellectual and political ideas whilst living in Europe and the United States of America, functioning within the respective Muslim communities and groups.

Such an outcome points to the importance of those Muslim communities, not only in terms of their respective relations and reach in the depth of the Arab and Muslim worlds, but to their significance and dynamism within their own European and American contexts.

This important paper by Dr Muhammad Abdul-Bari -- a long-standing and prominent member of the Muslim community in Britain -- comes at a time when the main Muslim organisations are being asked by their own members as well as society as a whole about their vision, objectives and ambitions within the context of a changing world on the one hand, and an increasingly suspicious homeland on the other.

With shrill voices emerging on the extremities of the mainstream on both sides, it is incumbent upon the main organisations and the individuals to clearly outline their thoughts for the role,

position and future of the British Muslim community. This is not merely for the benefit of the wider society, but also for the constituents of these organisations and the community at large at a time when the definition of what it means to be a British Muslim is mostly offered by ill-informed or hostile elements.

A new generation of British Muslims are emerging as leaders of the society. These new and upcoming leaders possess skills, experiences, talents and capacities which society can ill afford to lose. Muslim organisations face the immense challenge of living up to this potential through building capacities, opening channels and facilitating avenues through which young British Muslims can realise their full potential without having to do away with or undermine their faith and cultural identities.

British Muslim organisations are also responsible for shaping an adequate narrative which fits the requirements of a British society within a contemporary context, and contributing towards shaping Britain's relationships with the Muslim world at a time of mutual interests of political, social and economic nature. All this dictates that Muslim leaders live up to the aspirations and potentials embedded within the community.

This paper by Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari, who has been at the helm of community affairs but also spent many years interacting with the community's grassroots, provides a much needed mapping exercise and draws a way forward through a bold and clear presentation.

For some it will undoubtedly provide uncomfortable reading and a controversial assessment, for most, questions that are in need of answers. In either case, The Cordoba Foundation believes that the discussion which this initiates is a timely and important one.

We are grateful to Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari for his thoughts.

Dr Anas Altikriti

CHIEF EXECUTIVE
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MEET THE CHALLENGE, MAKE THE CHANGE

A call to action for Muslim civil society in Britain

Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari

INTRODUCTION

ONE thing most Muslims do seem to agree about these days is that there is a clear Muslim leadership deficit and the current Muslim situation is fraught with problems and challenges of epic proportion. Stating the obvious, the root cause of this situation is because of a lack of effective leadership within the community. Although improving in some isolated places and in some areas of life, the overall situation is disturbing. In spite of enormous potential in human and material resources in the Muslim ummah,¹ the immediate future does not look encouraging. If we see a ray of light somewhere, then gloom appears elsewhere.

Most Muslim countries are governed by tyrannical or autocratic regimes with little respect for the rule of law. Some of these nations that claim to be democratic are plagued with dysfunctional politics and economy. Foreign interventions in some Muslim countries in recent times, for whatever pretext, have had destructive consequences. The so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2011 created enormous hope among Muslims everywhere and initiated some positive changes in a few Arab countries for the first time in decades, but its wave seems to have fallen flat in other parts. The story is dispiriting. An Eastern proverbial question seems apt: 'If the whole body aches, where to apply the balm?'

The global Muslim situation is far too big a topic for a paper of this size; so, I have attempted to primarily concentrate on our condition in the United Kingdom *vis-à-vis* Western Europe. With a Muslim population of over 20 million and even after half a century of presence our levels of socio-economic deprivation and educational under-achievement in most European countries are mind-bogglingly low. Our positive integration with wider European society is mixed and our image in mainstream society is generally very negative. In addition, social ills affecting wider society are in the process of paralysing sections of our own community, as is testified by the Muslim population in prisons in some European countries.²

However, in some countries, particularly Britain, the Muslim communities have made noteworthy achievements in areas such as business enterprise, service sectors and in charity and relief work. There is therefore a need for balance in scrutinising our condition. Nevertheless, the overall social realities are challenging and we need to face them head on.

¹ Arabic meaning: 'community'. It is commonly used to mean the collective community of Islamic peoples. It can be used to mean the concept of a commonwealth of the Believers.

² Estimating the percentages of Muslims in prisons across Europe is not straightforward, but in Britain 21% of youth in young offender institutions are Muslims in 2011-12, compared with 13% in 2009-10 and 16% in 2010-11 - <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2244355/Proportion-young-Muslim-men-youth-jails-rises-quarter-offenders-say-follow-faith.html>

The post-9/11 and post-7/7 world has laid bare our multiple weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Various interest groups have emerged in recent times to marginalise Muslims in the public domain – the neo-cons and neo-liberals, ultra-Zionists and the extreme Right. It seems that for a small section in media and politics their main job is to present Muslims as a liability and a security threat to the society. Islam is now seen by many in mainstream European society as inherently incompatible with ‘western values.’ Suspicion about Muslims has rocketed. When someone with a Muslim-sounding name commits a crime then religion seems to come to the fore immediately, while this is not an issue for others. Amnesty International’s April 2012 report on anti-Muslim discrimination across Europe, *Choice and Prejudice: Discrimination Against Muslims in Europe*, highlighted the mounting plight of Muslims in recent times.³ Islamophobia is now ‘socially acceptable’, as Baroness Warsi, the UK Cabinet Minister from the Conservative Party, has bravely pointed out.

In a pluralist society no community or group can afford to bury its head in the sand for too long, but it appears we are doing exactly this year after year. We are now caught in a whirlwind of social storms. A negative public mood, if not tackled properly by us all in time, can one day cause irreparable damage. Europe has had its ugly phases, for example very recently in the Balkans. We cannot be complacent and leave others to fight our battles for us.

I have been a community activist for the last three decades, involved in youth and community work, teaching in state schools in London, running mosques, facilitating parenting workshops and writing on this subject. My direct experience of the dynamics and complexities in our various communities has led me to think hard about tactical and strategic pathways to address the challenges we face. This paper is a small attempt in this regard. It outlines some of our major concerns and charts out a few prioritised practical measures in a spirit of introspection, and with the aim of leading to effective action.

The paper primary attempts to initiate a frank and rigorous debate within Muslim activist circles and to widen the discussion into all sections of our community. We are generally bogged down in our own small cosy worlds. Unless we are able to come out of them and confront the challenges straight on, our future is worrying indeed. My personal approach here is a bottom-up one, to engage with activists at the grassroots rather than to proclaim grandiose initiatives from the top. This is not to undermine any individual or group, for I hold anyone working for the good of society in great respect.

As a ‘community of purpose’⁴ it is incumbent on us to open our eyes wide, see the extent of the difficulties that are further weakening us and work assertively to put our house in better shape. We have remarkable human potential to overcome our problems and we possess the ability to create a better society if we can turn around our internal mismanagement.

³ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR01/001/2012/en/85bd6054-5273-4765-9385-59e58078678e/eur010012012en.pdf>

⁴ Qur’an 3:110

In describing the concerns I have adopted Allama Iqbal’s famous term *Shikwa*, ‘complaint’ or concerns. Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), the renowned philosopher, poet and politician, who felt deeply for the *ummah*’s predicament in his time, trusted the *ummah*’s ability to rise-up again. His role model, like every Muslim’s, was indeed the ‘perfect man’, the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him). Like his worthy predecessors, Iqbal was

desperate to sort out the mess that engulfed the *ummah*. Now, in our own times, we need Muslim activists in Europe to similarly strive to acquire insights into our predicaments and to work to extricate us from our current plight.

Within Europe, my main focus is on Britain where, with a population estimated to be over 2.7 million,⁵ Muslims have largely become an established community. We have a significantly higher proportion of youth population among us; we also have a good number of convert Muslims and indigenous Muslims of European extraction. With the growth of our numbers through migration, birth and conversion as well as achievements in some areas of life, we are often seen as a notable socio-political and economic force by Muslim communities elsewhere in Europe. Therefore our ability here is to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps will have major effect elsewhere, *inshaAllah*.

CURRENT CONDITION OF BRITISH MUSLIMS

An overview of key Muslim activist groups

In Islam, particularly in the Sunni tradition, there is no religious hierarchy. Without a centralised authority it is not easy to enforce uniformity across the spectrum. Moreover, Muslims in Western Europe hail from all parts of the world and it is not easy to bring them together as a single community in their new country, whatever their religious yearnings or social needs. This, no doubt, has been a major cause of the difficulties in harmonising and coordinating efforts.

Some of the different schools of thought and approaches to be found in Britain are listed below, excluding the 'violent extremist' ('*Jihadist*', as described by some) and 'liberal' ('progressive' or 'secular democrat') groups. Activists from these diverse trends established many voluntary, specialist or 'community' organisations, over the decades; they are too many to be listed:

Barelvis, also known as *Ahle Sunnah*, focus on the love and veneration of the Prophet (peace be upon him) as a means of salvation. Many Barelvis have close ties with various Sufi *tariqas* (orders). At present this tendency is well-regarded in Government circles in Britain. Many mosques in Britain are Barelvi-controlled.

Deobandis take their name from the famous Deoband seminary in India, established by prominent scholars after the failed insurrection against the British in 1857. The Deobandis reject practices such as the veneration of saints and visits to shrines, putting them at odds with Barelvis. Many of the seminaries in Britain that yield 'home-grown' imams have been established by scholars trained in the Deobandi schools, and a good proportion of mosques are Deobandi-inclined.

Tablighi Jamaat is an offshoot of the Deobandi movement that emerged in 1926 in British India. According to some, they were a response to Hindu reform movements. Their main emphasis is preaching and conveying the religion. Members rigidly follow the movement's literature.

⁵ Islam in the United Kingdom - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_the_United_Kingdom

Salafis, sometimes also known as *Wahhabi*, is a trend claims to stick to the practice of the earliest Muslims, the pious *Salaf* or predecessors. The Salafis tend to take a literalist approach in understanding the sacred texts. They have a notable following within the British higher education sector.

Islamic Movement ... is a generic term for groups that do not restrict religion to personal piety but see Islam having its own unique social and political message.

Ahle Hadith is a movement close to the Deobandi and Salafi groups. In the past donors from the Gulf have favoured imams of this school of thought.

Islamic Movement this is a generic term for groups that do not restrict religion to personal piety but see Islam having its own unique social and political message. Examples include the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Jamaat-e-Islami in South Asia. They are described by their detractors as 'Islamist' or 'fundamentalist'. Their off-shoot groups in Europe have been active in community work, establishing mosques and research centres, publishing houses and journals.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (The Liberation Party): the party was formed by Taqi al-Din Nabhani in the 1950s, after he left the Muslim Brotherhood. The party is an international pan-Islamic political organisation, outspoken on political issues concerning Muslim unity under the Caliphate (*Khilafah*⁶). It has been under media scrutiny and much demonised in recent times. It used to be a force on higher education campuses in Britain but is less so now.

Non-affiliated/broad-based: these are networks and organisations that strive to be inclusive of all schools of thought and culture, open to all Muslims in order to tackle shared concerns and problems. The oldest of such groups is the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS), founded in the early 1960s, and the most recent is perhaps the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB).

All of the above strive in their own way and have a tradition of Islam-inspired activism to improve the condition of Muslims. Problems arise when they occasionally fall out with each other. Schisms did in fact develop among some groups in the 1980s and 1990s; this weakened their overall work. The situation got worse in the aftermath of the London bombings on 7th July 2005 (7/7) when successive Governments favoured some Muslim groups over others by means of patronage and funding; the effect of this was further fragmentation of the Muslim community.

All of this has entrenched the differences and created specific niches and brands of our community or religious work. Transplanted to modern secular societies various activist groups followed the models of Islamic works belonging to their countries of origin. With mixed demography amongst their co-religionists and practical constraints, including financial and cultural, they found it difficult to co-ordinate their work or create unified Muslim bodies.

This is borne from the nature of the evolution of our community, the disjointed work of various groups and a lack of required coherence in our community leadership. Some

⁶ Literally a successor, i.e. a successor to Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). It is a Muslim spiritual community led by a supreme religious and even political, leader known as a Caliph. Conceptually the 'Caliphate' is a constitutional republic that represents political unity of the global Muslim *ummah*, under Islamic law or *Sharia*. The term is often applied to successions of Muslim empires.

sceptics within the Muslim community use the metaphor of our leaders as being in an ineffective football team; the players are playing, many undoubtedly very hard, but with little or no co-ordination. The result is obviously poor. A lack of social and political leadership is visible in our communities across Europe.

The questions to consider here, in the UK-European context, are:

1. What are the Muslim Community's internal factors that are inhibiting our progress? Do our leaders possess the necessary leadership skills, charisma and know-how to operate within a modern complex world order, and of course within the framework of Islamic principles?
2. What are the external factors, such as from the society and political class including the governments that pose multiple challenges in our effort to move ahead with internal harmony?

I have tried to address in this paper our internal factors. In order to do this I have used my practical experiences and have tried to be as objective as possible. I value every effort, small though it may be, undertaken by every group for the benefit of our and wider society. The issue here is not about whether our various groups are serving their own constituencies, they are with varying degrees of success, but it is about our overall effectiveness. On the whole, we are not succeeding in the rejuvenation of the whole Muslim community and protecting ourselves from the damaging narrative engulfing us. On the other hand, our ability to influence and contribute to wider society is lacking.

Some major concerns (*Shikwa*)

So a quick breakdown of the key challenges we face – I have listed below, a few major concerns (*Shikwa*) in my understanding of their priority. These are my own observations drawn out of my relentless commitment to our community but also from the feeling of pain of our collective inability to harness our own potentials. Obviously, the list is not exhaustive.

Shikwa 1 – Deficiency of knowledge and scholarship

At the heart of our weaknesses lies the general impoverishment of knowledge, not only among ordinary Muslims but also among activist Muslims and leaders. This knowledge deficit and lack of scholarship seem to have become widespread among Muslims almost everywhere for some time. While general illiteracy in the Muslim world is lacking, the educational under-achievement of Muslims in most European countries is untenable.

This deficit is both about our knowledge and understanding of Islam, the Qur'an, the *Seerah* of our beloved Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and our historical past. Very few of us, even among the activists, have sufficient understanding of the 'objectives of religion' and 'nuances of jurisprudence' (*Maqasid al-Shari'a* and *Usul al-Fiqh*). Not many of us have an appreciation of priorities in *Fard* (compulsory), *Sunnah* (Prophetic tradition) and *Nafl* (supererogatory good deeds) in their proper order, in rituals and in

our day to day life. Because of this, many practicing Muslims are inclined to become mere ritualistic and our rituals too often become mechanical.

There are those who possess knowledge but lack the contextual understanding (siyaq or al-waqi'a) for a 21st century situation.

At the same time, this knowledge deficit of ours is about the contemporary society we are living in and the material world we belong to, giving rise to a loss of confidence and pride among many Muslims. Then there are those who possess knowledge but lack the contextual understanding (*siyaq* or *al-waqi'a*) for a 21st century situation. In addition, there is a significant number who are weak in implementing their knowledge through action; the community gets very little from them.

As many of us couldn't care less about our own history and legacy, this has, in effect, created amnesia in relation to glorious Muslim contributions in science, technology and other human sciences. This, in my opinion, is antithetical to our Islamic tradition and against the spirit of Islam.

Knowledge is the key to success, as it connects the believers with their root, i.e. Allah, and catapults a nation to further accomplishment. As this is not the case any more with Muslims, our connection with Allah and the Qur'an has become incredibly weak. Consequently, many Muslim activists in modern Europe seem to be very weak in the Islamic character which is very much needed to serve people. For a Muslim, Islamic faith demands in our character constant God-consciousness (*taqwa*); the pinnacle is Godliness (*Ihsan*). We may be community activists, religious leaders or scholars (*Ulama*), political activists, academics, professionals or business entrepreneurs; but we have to ask ourselves whether love, mercy and truth penetrate our hearts? If not, then mere recitation of holy words or ritual practice would be meaningless.

Lack of unity, co-operation and warmth

Because of the nature of evolution our community in Europe is varied. Mosques, centres and community organisations grew in parallel and became ethnicity-oriented, culture-centric or sect-based. There could be 'Pakistani', 'Bangladeshi' or 'Arab' mosques very close to each other, sometimes in the same street. In addition to these internal dynamic, there have been witting or unwitting contributions of post-7/7 national governments in many European countries, including Britain, in fragmenting our community further. As we originate from across the world, the conflicts in some Muslim countries are also adding to our internal tensions. As a result, physical and emotional barriers have developed among many Muslims, giving rise to scepticism or fear of others among some activists. Even the new generation of Muslim youth is often caught in a tribal mind-set.

Diversity is truly a blessing in the *ummah*, but some of our activist Muslims are rather fragmented along the lines of theological and socio-political trends. Labelling 'other' Muslims or groups negatively ('seeing the glass half empty') or using derogatory terms such as '*kafir*'⁷ for others in public has fortunately disappeared in recent times, but the shortage of warmth and a meaningful cooperation among them is still a reality and can be very dispiriting to many. Extreme (I am using it differently from what is meant by Islamic 'extremism' by the political class in the West) tendencies or rhetoric within some of our activist individuals and groups are inhibiting our internal harmony and overall

⁷ The term refers to a person who rejects God or who hides, denies, or covers the "truth."

effectiveness.

As a consequence of the historical decay of the *ummah* since the dark days of colonialism, and many other factors, there appears amongst many Muslim leaders and elders in our community a low 'tolerance for ambiguity' in their organisational and social dealings. The leaders and elders are generally used to receiving, and have become accustomed to, praise for their leadership and organisational ability. But this is proving incompatible in increasingly complex and networked societies where high tolerance for ambiguity has become an important leadership trait. The ethos and spirit of complementing and co-ordinating in good works, 'agreeing to disagree'⁸ as it is called, is thus weak amongst many of us in reality. What we often see is the rhetoric of 'brotherhood', or of 'unity', but not as much of warmth and little practical co-operative action. Some may even use the jargon phrases as meaningless lip service. A critical observer may see disguised and unhelpful competition.

As Muslims we all want to regain our authentic past glory and genuine pride, but nostalgia is not the answer.

'Returning to Islam' has become different things to different people

As Muslims we all want to regain our authentic past glory and genuine pride, but nostalgia is not the answer. It is an irony that while we passionately talk about 'returning to Islam', we hardly go into what we mean by this. For too many Muslims, our return to Islam means increasing some rituals, improving our external looks, organising more events for the sake of, some critics say, ticking boxes – in reality, doing 'more of the same'.

To some activists it may mean impulsively running around like 'headless chickens' with their 'heart before head'. And, to some Muslims it is about how deeply they can insulate themselves into their ghettos or 'cosy world' for fear of 'losing' Islam and their children's future. Some practising Muslims want to 'protect' Islam and their Muslim compatriots from the onslaught of surrounding permissive and commercialised culture and lifestyles. There is hardly any serious thought behind all this defensive posture. This most probably stems from a shortage of confidence and an avoidance of determined action to play their positive role in wider society; Islam is not as brittle and our community is not as fragile as these people probably think!

I feel a throbbing pain when I see many of our well-meaning dedicated activist Muslims burning their energy by 'marking time'; many of them have probably little clue as to where they are going and what they want to achieve.

There is however a gradual understanding and confidence building up among some concerned Muslims, but it is taking time. As a humble activist, privileged to be able to work with our various communities for all these years, I can visualise our continuous pitfalls that have the danger of further weakening us if we fail to comprehend what 'returning to Islam' reality means and act upon it.

Shikwa 2 – Crisis of effective leadership

Most Muslim organisations are obviously run by Islam-inspired activists who are

⁸ Taha Jabir al-Alwanis
*The Ethics of Disagreement
in Islam* would be a
useful read.

generally well-intentioned, good-mannered and hard-working; many of them are genuinely passionate to serve the community and humanity. While these are essential qualities that are needed to start the job, the question is whether our leaders have the required personal and group qualities and ability to understand the essence of Islam and its message in modern times. It is also relevant to know how many of them are reasonably aware of the surrounding society, and of the context in which they are working.

Sadly, the fear is many of them may not possess the ability to analyse their own strengths and shortcomings and of the people they are seeking to serve in order to chart out the programmes of action for the community *visavis* the wider complex and pluralist society. They may be very active within their own group, but very few see things beyond their immediate community horizon and a significant proportion are unable to relate to wider society in any meaningful sense; there is a dearth of social leadership among our leaders. The picture on the ground, as it stands, is indeed unsatisfactory.

Our collective inability to address our internal weaknesses, to withstand the external challenges and to project ourselves as a 'middle path' community are not only undermining us in the eyes of the wider society but also alienating many of our very own children. There appears to be a clear shortage of the necessary sense of urgency, imagination, fire and drive among our leaders. Without being too critical, the reality is there appears to be a confidence-deficit in the community itself with regard to many of our leaders.

Organisations not 'fit for purpose'

Lack of inclusiveness and inability to accommodate ideas seem to have become the hallmarks of many Muslim organisations that are often, as critics would say, high on rhetoric but low on delivery. There seems to be little or no vision and an inability to look beyond the immediate communities with which they work. Sadly, our traditional and inflexibly structured organisations appear to have lost their appeal to, most critically, our youth; who see these organisations as unnecessarily bureaucratic, process driven and irrelevant. While there is occasional flair in events, conferences, courses and disjointed activities there is want of a visible strategy to join the dots and project our 'best community'⁹ vision. Some of them are like shells within shells, having perhaps little connection with or relevance to wider society.

As narratives around Islam and the prevailing discourse on Muslims are increasingly going from bad to worse to catastrophic, our individual organisational and collective failure to challenge this negative portrayal of Muslims in devising effective counter-narratives or initiating positive discourse is wearisome, particularly to the young activists. I say this with much pain and do not point fingers at any individual group, but I see little action on this front. Much of their activities are on the whole piecemeal, unconnected, inward-looking and short-termist; consequently, the net outcome is seen as having little or no influence on reversing this trend.

Some formal and informal co-ordination has been around for some time, thanks to the efforts of various farsighted people in the community. In some countries umbrella bodies have also been formed; the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is an example. But the good intentions and occasional efforts to give platforms to air the views of disparate

⁹ Qur'an 3:110

groups have not succeeded in changing the internal dynamics of our community to create positive synergy. The reason, in my opinion, is twofold: 1) we have a shortage of social leadership acceptable to the main groups and also to the community, and 2) affiliate bodies probably do not take these platforms seriously enough and do not invest their human and material resources to make them successful. As a result, these joint ventures do not have the necessary teeth and mechanisms to even resolve the gaps and tensions that exist among various groups, let alone to unitedly promote the common good of wider society. The community does not seem to buy in to the initiatives, for they apparently do not see much value in them.

Lack of succession plans to hand over batons of leadership

There are plenty who criticise the first generation of activist Muslims for their shortcomings. However, it is vital we bear in mind that they were the people who set up most Muslim institutions that we see up and down the European landscape today - numerous mosques and prayer centres, community organisations, charities, schools and businesses. The community has a significant presence in health and some other professions, in charity and in business enterprise. Although not that effective, there is some presence in politics as well. Blanket criticism of first generation leadership will be very unfair; we should celebrate what has been achieved, appreciate what we have now and build from there.

Having said this, we see a harsh reality that there is a huge reticence among many in the older generations in gradual and natural handing over of community and mosque leadership to the upcoming new generations. Some of these leaders try to cling to their power base with even unethical means until their last breath. This sometimes creates embarrassing internecine quarrels in the community. The other side is, due to resulting stagnation organisations created by them decay exponentially and lose their appeal and effectiveness. The possessiveness of Muslim elders is a big barrier to transferring the baton of community leadership to the youth. For sincere Muslims who want to see a better future for their progeny this is heart-breaking.

Nobody is saying that the elders should be bypassed in public roles, but unless there is a succession plan to bring in competent and capable people, fresh talent to community leadership roles on time there is little hope for a better future for our community. While this is one part of the story, it is also true that many of our young activist Muslims lack sufficient patience, perseverance and wisdom to work with the elders and politely push their way in. We can never create a win-win situation if the energy and creativity of our youth is not blended with the wisdom and experience of the elder generation.

Ineffectiveness of Movement groups in the Muslim minority context

In the aftermath of centuries-old Muslim stagnation, the 20th century Islamic movements were seen by many to emerge with an inspirational vision of Islam - to revitalise the *ummah*, reclaim the spirit of Islam and re-establish the just social order for the benefit of humanity. Their message captured the imagination of countless talented Muslim activists of their time and was able to create a buzz in some parts of the Muslim world. One of their

most important achievements was their ability to bring into their fold Muslims of all ages and from various trends, particularly from amongst the young; there appeared for some time a unity of purpose in Islam-inspired socio-political activism and in the beginning the speed of progress they were making was quite impressive.

However, over decades and for probably structural reasons, some of these movements seem to have lost much of their steam. A mixture of complacency and overconfidence appears to have thwarted their progress and inertia has taken over. They are seen by many as elitist and exclusivist, not people-oriented. Their vision may still inspire many today, even in the European countries; but the groups that originated from the mother movements have so far been unable to contextualise the vision with timely structure and strategy. Lethargy seems to have crept into some of these groups. With ineffective leadership and borrowed methodology their appeal to today's activists in Europe is narrowing.

Shikwa 3 – Failure to harness the talents of our youth and Muslims of European extraction

We seem to be growing further and further apart from our vital assets - our youth, particularly the professional section - leading to the loss of their precious energy, passion and creativity in the service of the Muslim community. With smart phones and the internet now forming part of their lives, and social networks increasingly replacing physical ones, traditional close knit communities forged by the common experience of disadvantage are breaking down. Add to this the prevailing individualism, material indulgence, laissez-faire morality and sexual permissiveness are all having a huge negative impact, particularly on younger people. They are at the receiving end of all the social 'experiments', some might say social engineering, regarding belief and lifestyle. The effect is so pervasive that even many practising Muslim youth are seen to be torn between the relentless portrayal of the apparent rigidity of Islam and the regular media-driven diet for a more indulgent and consumer-excess life. Unless the talent and energy of Muslim youth are properly harnessed and channelled by their parents, the mosques and more importantly by the young Muslims themselves – then the future of Muslims is bleak indeed.

At the same time, the generational and cultural gaps in our community have multiplied over the decades; culture is often portrayed as Islam by many in the older generation, and this tends to drive our youth further away from religious moorings. The activist groups, generally, have not been able to keep pace with time and adapt themselves to changes; they are not seen to be addressing these gaps and harnessing the talent of the youth, including young Muslim women. In recent years young Muslim women have done extremely well in education and many of them are now taking up professional careers. We ignore their contribution to our community life at our peril.

Poor or ineffective parenting, particularly in children's preparatory and early teenage years, is yet another weak link that is alienating a big section of our youth. No wonder many of them seem to lack motivation and some end up being involved in delinquent and anti-social behaviour or even criminal activities.

It is also unfortunate that involvement of young Muslims in our mosque and community structures, where leadership is still a monopoly of a certain section, is minimal; they generally find it difficult to fit in. There are often, as some frustrated people comment, brick walls and our youth do not have the patience or will to overcome or break them. Even activist young Muslims, courageous as they are, are often 'fish out of water'; some hang around with various groups and others become passive spectators of their surroundings. We are unable to create the space and time to better connect, understand and share the fundamental Godliness, ethical and community-centred values of Islam.

Many within the successful and ambitious section are taking professional career paths. This is highly commendable, but at the same time the important question is 'are they giving something back to their community?' Only a handful of them seem to be breaking ranks and are trying to create their niche. The overall wastage of these huge resources within our community is shocking!

The issue of inability of our mosques and community organisations to involve the significant number of 'revert' (convert) Muslims and Muslims of European extraction in the UK is also a serious one. They themselves are culturally diverse and many of them are successful professionals and entrepreneurs; however, they are not so visible in British Muslim community life and in the public domain. They seldom have mosques or community centres of their own. Apparently, due to cultural and to some extent language gaps, they are living a parallel life from other Muslims. This 'minority within a minority' appear to be 'fish out of water' in the 'majority' Muslim culture.

Shikwa 4 – Underestimating the external challenges and our reactiveness

The external challenges facing our communities are mounting in inverse proportion to our ability to understand how the organs of mainstream society operate. In addition to the woeful lack of understanding of, and access to, the levers of power it exhibits fairly fundamental deficits in our ability to proactively meet the challenges of the 21st Century.

European Muslims are facing, for at least the last two decades, an onslaught of a number of external challenges leading to serious intellectual and political crises. Our inroad to positive integration and contribution to the society is severely thwarted because of this. These crises contributed to a global tension between Muslims and the western world. In recent decades, it started with the deliberate vilification of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and his household by Salman Rushdie through his Satanic Verses novel in 1989 which was followed by the Danish cartoons in 2005 and the 'Innocence of Muslims' hate film in the US in 2012.

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The slander against Islam's Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) has been carried out deliberately by an anti-Muslim brigade in the name of freedom of speech, which is selectively being used against Muslims. To Muslims and many sensible people they are nothing but hate speech or incitement to religious hatred – Islamophobia in short. However, I must mention that violent reaction by certain fringe Muslims in some parts

of the world against this provocation is an embarrassment and has nothing to do with Islamic teachings of tolerance and dignity.

At the same time, neocon think-tanks across the Atlantic have been aggressively setting the agenda for Muslims and are categorising all into moderate, extremist, secular, etc. The rhetoric of vote-chasing politicians, pseudo academics, media analysts and hate groups has apparently succeeded in swapping a racist agenda for an Islamophobic one. The lacklustre response from European political masters has paved the way for anti-Muslim bigotry to move closer to the mainstream. Ill-defined usage of terms such as *Jihadist*, *Islamist*, *Wahhabist*, etc, to depict Muslims or groups who are active in the social and political arena has been the vogue of the day in media and political life. Their often prejudiced ‘research findings’ are being swallowed by some governments for political or ideological purposes, for example, to devise patronising policies regarding which Muslim groups they will support, work with or put on hold. The disparaging policies against Muslims that gained momentum after the 7/7 atrocities in London are becoming widespread.

However, responses by the Muslim community to these crises are almost always reactive, ineffective and inappropriate. Violent reactions by a fringe segment in some parts of the Muslim world have added fuel to the fire. Some of our activist groups are even unaware of the extent of the damage they are causing to us and our relationship with wider society. Others seem to be too busy with their routine works or ignorant to the hidden dangers to address the issues proactively and holistically. This is widening the gaps between our community and others.

THE WAY FORWARD

The need for a ‘big picture’ vision¹⁰

Given the fragmentation of our community for historical reasons, we need to develop a vision greater than ourselves and our individual organisations; this ‘big picture’ vision must be greater than the sum of our parts. Like the most unlikely man who became President of the most powerful nation on Earth once said “we need to hitch our wagon to a greater cause”. Individual and group successes are of course a prerequisite, but if they remain unconnected and piecemeal there is little hope for the community to progress. Our actions and criteria for success have to be within the framework of Islamic principles of ‘wilful submission to the will of Allah’; this means, as His stewards, to serve humankind and to be responsible caretakers of the planet we are living in; to leave this world better than we found it. In essence it is about elevation of human dignity through working for the common good (*maslaha*) of all.

¹⁰ Vision is about our mental image of what our future should be like and true perception of our future needs. It is about our ability to think and plan this future with imagination and wisdom, passion and determination.

This ‘greater cause’ vision demands an integrated but recognisable improvements in our internal capability and capacity. We need a colossal step of change in self-empowerment in key areas including: academia, education-science, economic conditions, socio-cultural capital, media, and political influence. We can only do this by proactively and positively integrating (this does not mean loss of identity and Islamic values) in the affairs of society so that we become catalysts of a positive change in this continent of creative dynamism.

This is about a positive change, creating a new paradigm and becoming a force for good. This includes our collective success in defeating the forces of intolerance and hatred – towards all people not just Muslims. Yes, we must focus on the rising tide of obnoxious Islamophobia in recent times, by working together, but equally importantly making allies and partnerships with all the forces for good in the continent. If we work to eradicate the massive inequalities, social injustices and seek to establish a better understanding among people of diverse communities, we stand a better chance of overcoming our own challenges.

We need real change makers with transformational character from amongst us who would endeavour to achieve these goals with specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timeframe-specific (SMART) strategies.

With this in mind, it is now imperative we revisit our vision and strategy in Europe and attempt to overhaul our Muslim civil society. It is vital that activist Muslim organisations bring about a sharp renewal of their structure and methodology and shape themselves to be inclusive if they are to do anything meaningful for Islam and the Muslim communities in Europe. But this cannot be done by just repeating the same thing over and over again in the name of change by mere scratching the surface of the challenges.

It is time we step back and start afresh, with a penetrative mind and profound thinking, free from our preconceived mindsets and cultural inhibitions. It is imperative our frame of reference remains the exemplary life (*Seerah*) of our beloved master Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and his worthy companions. We need to see the big picture now as they saw then, beyond our immediate situation, and create an emotional attachment with people we are living amongst and be the catalyst of positive change wherever we live. Our plan and action have to be much wider than what we have been doing so far within our small world; our aim has to be very high indeed. We need to ask ourselves some hard questions. How can we rise above the regrettable under-utilisation of our institutions that our predecessors had been building over decades with their sweat and sacrifice? How can we draw on the potential unused in our community? How can we maximise our outcome? And so on.

This is such a vital issue that we do not have time to point fingers towards others. To be honest, the Islamic teaching is that our fingers should first be pointed at ourselves. However, rather than being despondent about our shortcomings we should concentrate on finding where the gaps lie, why we are faltering after so much hard work, and why we are under-performing compared to other people. We should build on what we have and must not waste our time and energy in reinventing the wheel. My trust in the sincerity of ordinary Muslims and the ability of activist Muslims, especially from our youth, is rock solid. They can do miracles if properly advised, supported, guided and led. But we ourselves need to strengthen and deepen our confidence to deal with pertinent issues.

As a start, we must find time for study and reflection; we must learn how to prioritise between primary and secondary. We must make sure that we have sufficient time for our own family (including 'extended' family if we have one), neighbours and community. Most importantly, we should have undisturbed time to build our relationship, in a one-to-one loving connection, with the ultimate source of everything, Allah. Our introspection,

our compulsory rituals and our dealings with others should be built on the deepest love that emanates from Allah. To me, our faltering is not due to lack of activities or number of events we organise; rather, we probably do too much and stretch too wide to make them meaningful. We must now look for quality and productivity.

Our first few generations laudably created essential 'hardware' in the form of buildings and structures, it is vital we now create 'software' (creative and effective people) to utilise them properly

There is no shortcut to overcoming the predicament that has been piling on us; there is also no shortcut to achieve easy gains in this highly competitive and merit-based world. At a time when activist groups are struggling to keep their own talented people on board, underperforming in leading their own communities and often getting weaker by internal squabbles, replicating the same old thing in the same old way is not going to work. Putting high energy into building more mosques or organisations, arranging more events and running more courses may be tempting, even today, but by themselves they are not going to resolve our predicament. All these I have mentioned are the brick and mortar hardware; we need effective software that delivers – more quality people and their commitment.

I dare not undermine any effort being carried out sincerely by dedicated people, especially when it comes to excellent works like building mosques and community centres and organising charities; but I have a right to ask why we aren't putting similar, if not more, energy into creating the very people who can take us to the next level of achievements. Why aren't we investing some of our efforts in running our existing mosques and institutions more professionally? Our first few generations laudably created essential 'hardware' in the form of buildings and structures, it is vital we now create 'software' (creative and effective people) to utilise them properly for the benefit not only of Muslims but also for people in the wider society.

We must also urgently look after those in our community who, unfortunately, are stained by social ills, bringing danger to their families and disrepute to us all. It is really important that this section of our community remains within the radar of our successful Muslim charities and other relevant organisations; there should be professional and culturally sensitive community interventions to help them come out of these ills.

Looking back to our role model, our beloved Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), we can see what his preference was. He successfully created worthy people to take up the challenges of the contemporary society and created the model society for us. What was the secret of his success? He brought together youthful individuals with passion and love for humanity and moulded them to shine in their individual and group character. It is not surprising that most of his companions were in the age range of 10 to 35 years. This, to me, is a very powerful tradition (*Sunnah*) in our current situation everywhere.

As activist Muslims subscribing to the vision of an all-inclusive and universal Islam we should indeed go back to the drawing board, brush up our thinking and move closer to the society we are living in. We should be able to act with tsunami-like energy and drive, as the Prophet's companions (*Sahaba* – may Allah's pleasure be on them) did in their time, to work for the harmony and good of all. We must purify our intention from, wittingly or

unwittingly, treating ourselves as a ‘tribe’ – ethnic, linguistic or any grouping – whatever that might be. We should not be seen as playing the victim card for our inabilities.

It is a blessing from Allah that we are on the right track by being socially active; it’s time we make this journey more effective and rewarding for others. We should be on our guard and keep on praying to Allah that we remain steadfast in our faith and positive action. Can we not become part of the group which honestly responds to the call mentioned in the Qur’an; *‘And from amongst you there must be a party who will call people to all that is good and will enjoin the doing of all that is right and will forbid the doing of all that is wrong. It is they who will attain success.’*¹¹

One more critical point: in a continent where the overwhelming majority of the population are either uninformed or misinformed about Islam, we should be really careful about how we portray ourselves. As citizens of individual European countries we should be proud of our multiple but complementary identities. We may be known within the Muslim community for certain Islamic trends or backgrounds, including those which are mentioned in Section 2 of this paper, but we should not be over-enthusiastic in putting too much emphasis on those internal identities in the public domain. This is being used by our detractors to further divide us. Truly speaking, as Muslims we are there to serve people.¹²

This clear and unambiguous approach is in line with the Islamic spirit of unity and, once understood by Muslims, can be the springboard for ushering a universal common good. It is indeed critical that activist Muslims see the bigger picture, broaden their horizons and endeavour to work for all, rather than for their own ‘tribe’ or group. It is essential that we learn how to ‘join the dots’ of our individual or group activities. This altruistic approach and practice will not go unnoticed by the wider society for long; the image of Islam as a catalyst for positive change and Muslims as an inclusive community will gradually be recognised.

Muslim civil society

There is no easy answer to our current challenges and difficulties, the complaints or *Shikwa* listed in Section 3. This list, mentioned again below, is not exhaustive.

Shikwa 1 – Deficiency of knowledge and scholarship

Shikwa 2 – Crisis of effective leadership

Shikwa 3 – Failure to harness talents of our youth and Muslims of European extraction

Shikwa 4 – Underestimating the external challenges and our reactivity

Iqbal, who had deep knowledge of the East and the West and was at the same time a profoundly visionary leader, envisioned the way out of the *ummah*’s predicament about a hundred years ago through his *Jawab-e-Shikwa* (responses to the concerns). Many of his prescriptions still resonate with us today. The world has moved far from his period, but it is important that we retrace the pain and passion of our past intellectual giants and passionate lovers of the *ummah*.

¹¹ Qur’an 3:104

¹² This is in fact leadership in Islam, as mentioned in an authentic hadith: “The Leader of the people is their servant” (Ad-Daylami and Tabarani)

At the end of the day, it is about people, men and women who make history. It is about

change-makers who know how to lead and also how to follow. We need to pull together the kind of people that are needed in our time and place. This is what our predecessors invested in; they were able to produce worthy people to keep on shining, for generations and centuries. Egypt's Imam Hasan al-Banna was once asked why he was not writing books; his response was he was 'writing people'. Smaller numbers of people in small countries have been making history, whereas bigger countries with massive populations have stumbled. This is happening in front of our eyes even today. "... *How often has a small party prevailed against a large party by the leave of Allah. Allah is with those who remain steadfast*".¹³

I am putting forward a few priority tasks for the stakeholders in Muslim civil society who share similar pains in our current situation and are passionately determined to become change-makers in our community within the context of the wider pluralist society. I am sure nothing I am mentioning here is new, but these are matters of urgency, preference and internalisation. It is just a reminder from a humble community servant, made in the spirit of the Prophetic tradition that 'religion is reminder'.¹⁴

We are in a new and complex but interesting and amazing situation that needs deeper understanding and a new type of struggle or *jihad*¹⁵. Individual and group *jihad* to stand firm on Islamic principles and fight for equality and justice is now multi-faceted, knowledge-based and highly competitive. It is a battle of ideas on the one hand; it is also a battle of building individual and group character in the 'colour of Allah' (*sibgatullah*) on the other. Societies cannot be created or recreated with creative ideas alone. They need humans with the required character to take forward the ideas and make things happen. Continual inertia and less-than-satisfactory performance on the part of Muslims are not only problematic to our community but also a nuisance to the wider society.

We need a gathering of dynamic and dedicated activists to start with, some good exemplars among us who would practise what they preach. They should start bringing some bite-size successes to first raise confidence in our community – 'success begets success'. I am sure once the caravan of selfless and dynamic movers and shakers starts its journey many others would join it in time, *inshaAllah*. It will create its own momentum; can turn into a snowball and even end up with a social avalanche for good. For this we need a good synergy among individuals or groups who have similar vision, passion and drive. Our community's survival as a principled people and the ability to become conveyors of goodness for humanity depend on this. These Islam-inspired social activists, a good mix of youth and age, have colossal tasks ahead of them. The task-list is big; I have reduced it to the following three key areas:

1. We must excel in **knowledge, skills and character** so that, as exemplars of goodness, we are able to take centre stage in mainstream society.
2. We must produce **worthy and competent leaders** from among us who, with an inclusive vision of Islam and undiluted love for all people, will be the catalysts for change in our community and the society.
3. We must raise our **political literacy**, educate ourselves in ethical politics and devise proactive communication strategies to promote equality and justice in the

¹³ Qur'an 2:249

¹⁴ Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said: 'The Deen (religion) is naseeha (advice/sincerity)'. We said 'to whom?' He said 'To Allah and His Book, and His Messenger, and to the leaders of the Muslims and their common folk.' (Related by Muslim)

¹⁵ The literal meaning of *Jihad* in Arabic is 'struggle'. The Qur'an has used this term as 'striving in the way of Allah'. It has two commonly-accepted meanings: an inner spiritual struggle and an outer physical struggle. It is not 'holy war' as in some translations.

society and defend the dignity of our community and other vulnerable people.

Agreeing and working on these three broad areas may not be the direct answer or solution (*Jawab*) for all the concerns (*Shikwa*) mentioned in Section 3, but I think they are essential for shaking our thoughts and prioritising our actions to come out of current difficulties and reclaim our dignity.

Excelling in knowledge, skills and character

The West creatively devised systems and institutions to extend individual and collective excellence, in specific countries and the wider world. The Royal Society in Britain, Nobel prizes, Olympics, Oscars, and so forth, are just a few global examples. One community, in spite of their historic dispersal and disadvantage for the last few millennia, has not only overcome many of the obstacles but has thrived in many fields; they are the Jewish people. Many from their community have become points of reference in diverse fields of academia and professions across the world in recent times.

We must initiate a resurgence of knowledge, education and skills in our community. This is imperative on us now in a highly competitive and developed society. No nation or community can continue to survive without education, skills, science and technology that help its economic growth, political sustainability and intellectual strength. The intellectual edge of the Muslim *ummah* in their heyday was due to their full understanding of and total commitment to this basic reality. They were fully aware of the inter-connectedness between tradition and modernity. As a result, they were creative and dynamic and were able to explore the cultural roots of science for positive social change; they simultaneously became masters of Islamic Sciences and of contemporary knowledge in their uplifting period.

The condition of Muslims now is inexcusable; apart from some flair in some individuals or groups we are now intellectual underdogs. We need to reverse this trend at any cost.

Islam is a religion based on knowledge and understanding. This includes basic understanding of the essence of Islam and of the true meaning of the Qur'an, and being well aware of the life and teachings (*Seerah*) of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) so that one can wilfully surrender to Allah. As the world is the preparatory ground for the Hereafter, it is also imperative Muslims muster the knowledge of the contemporary world by being ahead of others in all areas of life, including in running their affairs with good governance, basic economic sustenance and social coherence. In the sprint and marathon of life we cannot allow ourselves to be overtaken by others, through casualness and lethargy. We cannot be in the slow lane of life's highway for so long.

It is encouraging that some of our socially active young people seem to have grasped the importance of knowledge and are beginning to create successful niches in certain areas of modern life. This is indeed commendable. However, it is vital they set up their strategic goals and match this noble intention with professionalism and excellence. It is also essential they avoid the pitfalls of doing 'more of the same' and do not resort to any shortcut route to achieve their objectives. At the same time, it is also necessary they have

realistic plans to connect their activities with other socio-economic and political works going on in the community, within the 'big picture'. Little drops can make an ocean if they are joined up, or else they will dry out by social evaporation.

Reconnecting with our roots

Knowledge in Islam is noble and utilitarian; not for vain glory, harming the human race or demeaning human dignity. Its purpose is to benefit people in an interconnected world. For this we need to genuinely reconnect with our roots, namely with our Creator Allah, and return to the sources of our strength, namely the Qur'an (the last testament and the living miracle), and Sunnah (examples of our ultimate role model). This rootedness has to be holistic – physical and intellectual, emotional and spiritual. This is at the heart of our existence and success on earth. Many previous Muslim intellectual giants who initiated knowledge revolutions in various fields were not only masters of their subjects but were also practising Muslims with deep spirituality; some of them memorised the whole Qur'an in their early life and, having Arabic as their main language, internalised the Qur'an unlike many today who memorise and parrot it without understanding what they recite.

The essence of knowledge in Islam is to know our Lord, Allah (*We belong to Allah and to Him we will return*¹⁶), Who is *nearer to us than our jugular vein*¹⁷ and the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) *who is dearer to us than our own selves, and his wives are our mothers*.¹⁸ It is also to know the world we are living in and how best to become the stewards of the planet. Love for Allah and His Messenger (peace and blessings be upon him) gives rise to selfless love for fellow human beings and other creatures. This gives believers a purity of intention, motivates them to purify themselves, and inspires them with a sense of responsibility to act as agents of good. This cannot be achieved through any other beliefs or means. It is only through this reconnection with the sources and revitalisation of our energy that we can make the world a better place.

Excelling in our character

The natural outcome of knowledge in Islam is to attain excellence in character. Ritual worship, like prayer and fasting, is between a slave and his or her master. It is in fact meant to remind us how we can attain better personal and social qualities – to become better human beings. The *Seerah* and *Ahadith* of our Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and the practice of our righteous predecessors are the testimony of how profoundly important human character and good manners are. Humanity and character were and remain the main attraction for people to know Islam.

Two weighty sayings of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) are worth mentioning - "*Nothing is weightier on the Scale of Deeds than one's good manners*"¹⁹ and "*The best among you in Islam are those with the best manners, so long as they develop a sense of understanding*".²⁰ We cannot imagine bringing minimum respect for our community unless we become the embodiment of good character, which we are sadly devoid of currently. Only then would people around us feel a magnetic pull to Islam, as has happened in the past.

¹⁶ Qur'an 2:156

¹⁷ Qur'an 50:16

¹⁸ Qur'an 33:6

¹⁹ Sahih al-Bukhari

²⁰ Sahih al-Bukhari

Our selfless love and compassion for others and proactive endeavour (*jihad*) for justice should be at the heart of our interaction with fellow human beings, irrespective of their background. This is the demand of our love of Allah, as Allah's love for human beings is colour-blind. Love should be the motivating factor for all we do in our family, neighbourhood, community and wider society. Love and commitment to justice help us to stand firm on our core principles, and therefore to fight for equality and social justice and to challenge bigotry and despotism.

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Producing worthy leaders

We need to have amongst us some exemplary social leaders who, through their love for people and social competence, would be able to bring a sea-change in our community and wider society. They would physically and emotionally be attached to people around them, would be able to build on the strengths we have and work selflessly to turn our current challenges into opportunities. Indeed we have a huge pool of talented people with enormous potential in many walks of life. We have highly competent professionals in education, law, business and medical practices amongst us. Why then, are we not able to harness their talents so far? It is upsetting.

Our worthy social leaders would not only be able to make the best use of our existing institutions, for example mosques and Islamic centres, education and community organisations, and social enterprises, but they would also be able to boldly face up to the challenges of the mainstream detractors and take us forward with steadfastness and wisdom. This is 'aiming high', probably too high in our current situation. But 'the sky is our limit'!

What I am talking about is our required role in the wider society, which has become so interconnected that success or failure of a community affects others almost immediately. We have come to a point where we can either make or break our future. If we are able to make, the whole society gains; if we break, the society also suffers and we may one day end up facing an ignominious fate.

These worthy leaders would have unique Islamic and social qualities. They would a) be proud of their heritage and identities, b) be humble and rooted to people, c) lead by example, d) be able to bring a good level of unity within the community with the minimum goal of 'agreeing to disagree', and e) be able to empower our community through internal capacity-building in all walks of life.

Creating confident and rooted leadership that leads by example

Our worthy leaders do not have to be extraordinarily clever or charismatic. But they would be strong in principles, loyal to Islam, thoughtful, wise, down-to-earth, assertive and humble. Ordinary people can do extraordinary things in life, if they are able to grasp the reality of their time and contextualise their actions. These activist leaders, in essence servants of people, should have the necessary skills to stay in the middle-path

of Islam by navigating between the easy paths of extremism and liberalism; they would understand the Islamic obligation towards the *ummah* (community) and people around us (the *qaum*²¹) in the neighbourhood, workplace and the community. They would have no difficulty in maintaining a right balance between the obligations of these two types of people.

It is preferable if this leadership comes through our mosques, local organisations or grassroots community bodies. This is where their patience and wisdom are best tested. As many of our mosques and traditionally structured organisations are suffering from inertia and typical bureaucracy, the potential social leaders have to be steadfast and uncompromising in principles but should be flexible to work with existing leaders in the community. Leaders from our youth should be proactive and creative; however, they should be respectful towards our religious and traditional scholars. At the same time, they should be able to smartly work their way through the management systems of our mosques and institutions. If only a fraction of our energetic and committed social leaders could come up to lead our community and its institutions without burning out their energy, they would be able to inspire the confidence of our community; our social capital would rise sharply.

Once we have a reasonable number of socially active worthy leaders among us the world around would see in us an asset for the whole society. This was how our predecessors were seen in the unknown farthest lands in the past and this is how we can symbolise Islam's universalism to the people around us today; through examples, empathy, integrity and love for all. Islam teaches us that our good manners and positive action to others around us are unconditional; we should not be put off by others' prejudice and unfairness, or even by their dislike for us.

Complementing, coordinate and 'join the dots'

There will always be some duplication of effort in our community because of the way we evolved with people from the four corners of the world. It is also understandable that forming a coalition of Muslim organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain in many countries is not simple. Even an umbrella organisation may not be able to address many of our urgent issues. However, there are practical ways to circumvent some of the difficulties. Positive gestures among groups and good personal relationships can overcome many of the practical hiccups. Activist groups may come to informal or even formal agreements to work out protocols or memoranda of understanding to enhance levels of cooperation and coordination in the beginning. Leaders should leave no stone unturned to bring local, regional and national initiatives together. However, each group and every leader should watch out that they do not inadvertently give an impression to others that they have an agenda to dominate or take over. Creating barriers to unity is a major sin in Islam.

Given the bigger world we are in and multiple challenges we face, we should try to create our own niche for ourselves; we should try to excel in certain areas of work, so that we are not seen as a threat to other groups. We must avoid creating direct conflict with each other. There is no need to duplicate; our job should be to 'join the dots' and work within a big picture vision. There are plenty of dissimilar things to do to serve the community,

²¹ Arabic meaning: 'nation'. It refers to people who share a common language, culture, ethnicity, descent, and history. It also refers to any form of solidarity. It represents people who share a common territory and government such as people of a sovereign state, irrespective of their background.

without clashing with others.

Both generic work and specific expertise are important; however, the activist groups should avoid doing everything under the at the expense of professionalism. They should engage in areas of activity where they have proven excellence and that will not take them unnecessarily into others' territory. There is of course room for healthy competition to perform better; "Everyone has a direction towards which he turns; so excel one another in good works..."²² It is vital we stay away from territorial rivalry with others. Our internal discipline is an important ingredient to succeed in raising the standard of our community.

Preserving accord within the Muslim community

The internal dynamics and external factors that have given rise to multiple challenges for the community groups and the community itself in recent times need to be addressed robustly and sensitively by the activist groups. The growing fractures within Muslim communities as a result of various factors need to be tackled head on or else they can bring damaging consequences for all of us. We need to bring our cool heads together and meet formally or informally to discuss pertinent issues with an open mind. This should be initiated by people who hold positions of authority and influence within the various constituencies that make up our community.

Doctrinal and political differences cannot be eliminated altogether, but for Muslims with one Islam there are more agreements than disagreements between any two groups with apparently conflicting trends. It is imperative we learn the art of 'agreeing to disagree' for the broader interest of the community and the society; it would then be easier to work on agreed issues and live with a few disagreements. We can seek help from experts on how to resolve conflict, if and when needed. Conflict resolution has become an essential pillar to build and sustain a civil society in a pluralist environment; this skill is employed in international diplomacy. In Islam resolving differences between two Muslims, especially within a family or between families or groups, is a very rewarding task. "Surely the believers are none but brothers unto one another. Therefore make peace between your brothers and observe your duty to Allah that you may obtain mercy".²³

Building our internal capacity

The Muslim community, particularly most activist groups I know, lacks internal capacity and financial resources. As a result, we are not on a level playing field with others in wider society. The best way to improve our condition is to bring in efficient management and quality people to the fore. While volunteerism is in the spirit of Islam and always encouraged, we cannot simply be dependent on volunteers for a long time. Capacity building demands necessary funds to recruit competent people at all levels to run the institutions efficiently and professionalise their internal and external communications. Muslim organisations must come out of their impoverished financial situation and create well-resourced endowments (*awqaf*) so that they can financially stand on their own feet. Muslim people, particularly during the

While volunteerism is in the spirit of Islam and always encouraged, we cannot simply be dependent on volunteers for a long time. Capacity building demands necessary funds to recruit competent people at all levels

²² Qur'an 2:148

²³ Qur'an 49:10

Ottoman period, were effective in creating different endowments to serve people in their time.

Capacity building is a big topic that includes increasing the ability of our community through socio-political, educational and economic initiatives. It is about making our mosque management structures more professional and accountable so that talented people from diverse backgrounds would feel they have a stake in mosque affairs. Capacity building is a continuous process that should be embedded in the running of every organisation and institution. Empowering parents with positive parenting skills and helping them address youth and community issues effectively is also desperately needed as part of capacity building.

With a big number of mosques, centres and organisations up and down the country our future can only get better. What we now need is to run them effectively and involve all sections of our community, with our youth at the helm. It is time all Muslim community institutions were run democratically and with openness and accountability. By bringing in strategic vision and a welcoming organisational culture we should build them as sustainable institutions that will serve all in the society – Muslims and non-Muslims, the *ummah* and the *qaum*, respectively. With clearly defined constitutions, policies and procedures they should be seen as transparent and inclusive bodies. With clear succession plans, while maintaining continuity, they should be known as rule-based bodies.

If professional Muslims with a drive to serve their community come forward and take the burden of leadership on their shoulders they can bring life to many of our decaying organisations. But while efficient individuals are a necessity to initiate change and sustain it, an organisation should never be dependent on individuals for long. No one, however talented or wise, should be seen as indispensable in an organisation.

Learning the art of politics and communication

Politics rules the world and is thus a vital tool to run a nation or a community. But sadly it has been the weakest link for Muslims (or Achilles heel, as some say) since the early days of Islam. When the Islamic *khilafah* turned into kingship, most talented Muslims became worried and decided to concentrate on protecting and spreading education and scholarship to shield the religion and its spirit from the negative influences of not-so-worthy politicians. Politics was thus left in the hands of less scholarly and less competent people. As a result, although there were occasional flairs of good and competent governance, Muslims were getting raw deals from their rulers. It was the inherent spirit of Islam, the piety of scholars and resilience of Muslim masses that kept Muslims going for a long time in history.

The political situation in most Muslim countries now is depressing, to say the least, even after a few decades of their physical independence from European colonial powers. Today the Muslim world has become synonymous with ill-governance with ensuing illiteracy, poverty, autocracy, internal division and corruption. The arrogance of some Muslim rulers is breathtaking. Some Muslim rulers, like other autocrats, consider themselves beyond law; they possibly believe they own the country and the people in it. There is little Islamic spirit of *shura* (consultation), accountability, human dignity, equality and

freedom of expression. However, there seem to be some positive signs recently in some places. Time will tell whether this will translate into permanent improvement. This issue is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

Muslims in various European countries have obviously brought with them their age-old culture, including political, from their countries of origin. This manifests itself when they run their own organisations and institutions, Islamic or secular. Community politics and intra-organisational dynamics among Muslims are not of a high standard; they are often clan related or group-based and thus often divisive. As politics is generally looked down upon in many Muslim lands, many activist Muslims in Europe have a general antipathy towards mainstream politics. As a result we remain politically disadvantaged, in spite of huge opportunities and potentials. Some who try to enter into the world of mainstream politics generally lack required acumen, wisdom and determination; some even fall short on integrity. Very few of them can rise above the influence of the 'clan' system (*biradari*) and petty localism, giving an impression they are not for the whole society. A small minority are in mainstream national politics, but for political reasons they tend to follow their party line. On the whole, the Muslim impact on mainstream politics is as yet negligible.

The same is the case with our community's relationship with the world of media. We were caught in the aftermath of the 9/11 in the US and 7/7 in Britain when our mainstream political and media class put us under severe scrutiny. But we proved ourselves not only unprepared to counter this test, but were also unwilling to learn things fast. We ignored this at our peril. As a result, much damage has already been done. Due to determined efforts by some right wing think tanks, pseudo-academics and media columnists Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bigotry has nearly become accepted in mainstream European societies. The Tory Minister Baroness Warsi said sometime ago that 'hostility to Muslims has passed the dinner table test' in Britain. However, it is not too late; activist Muslims must now give due importance to mainstream politics and media.

Activist Muslims must now give due importance to mainstream politics and media.

It is essential we invest our energy and resources to - a) enhance our political intelligence and get involved in politics with integrity and wisdom, b) learn the art of lobbying and alliance building, and c) create a proactive communication strategy.

Enhancing political intelligence and getting involved in politics

The first lesson in politics is about educating the community in political literacy. People need to understand that politicians run our country, nationally and locally; the winning party forms the government that makes or changes the laws of the land that affect our lives. Good politics raises a nation high and bad politics pulls it down. There are various ways of doing politics; being politically conscious as citizens through taking part in elections and holding elected representatives to account is the minimum. The other proactive ways are joining political parties, standing for public office at elections, lobbying and campaigning, policy making, involvement in media and communications, and so on. All of these are important.

No human system of governance is perfect, but as long as there are checks and balances the system works well. As citizens of a democratic society it is our civic responsibility to understand the political system of the land and engage in politics in some way if we want to be full part of the society and have any impact on it. Whether someone will join the mainstream political parties to become local councillors or parliamentarians is a matter of choice who have an interest and ability to do direct politics, but once they decide to go into public life they must acquire political know-how and be serious in delivering to people what is needed of them.

In spite of flaws, politics is seen as a noble profession in developed countries and competent people join politics to serve the nation. However, we should be on our guard so that political manoeuvring and dirty politics cannot rob us of our principles and people of their rights.

Understanding the know-how of politics and doing politics with integrity of character to serve people and please Allah is not easy. Short-term gains and survival in the political game occupy many politicians' minds. Sadly, politics in recent times has become more opportunistic and ideological, not to mention underpinned by many in developed countries. It has turned out to be a profession of the privileged who have failed to stand up against inequality and injustice suffered by weaker and poorer people, such as white working class and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. In the absence of a level playing field many people, particularly the youth, are gradually showing apathy with regard to democratic processes. The less-than-satisfactory voter participation during national and local elections is just one example.

For Muslims to do good politics they need moral grit, integrity, wit, astuteness, a high level of determination and effective communication. At the end of the day, mainstream politics is crucial for a country and getting involved in it is vital. But one can start with, say, green issues and issues of social justice to learn how to survive in the world of politics in the beginning. Politicians deal with power, so they always need some mentors with wisdom and spirituality. The starting point could be a students union, trade union, green politics, or lobbying and campaigning. Those who are in the mainstream political parties should not always follow their party line for fear of the party whip; they must speak their mind and stand up for social justice and against discrimination and the victimisation of weaker groups as and when necessary, albeit with forceful and rational arguments.

Maintaining integrity in politics is indeed difficult in an amoral and commercial environment, but no community should shy away from political and media engagement. Proactive Muslims should, rather, be ahead of others if they want to contribute to the good of society. A deeper level of spirituality, proper understanding of political know-how and moral courage are the ingredients to keep oneself on the right track.

Learning the art of lobbying and alliance-building

We need to understand the infrastructure of our democratic government and how laws and policies are made and implemented. It is also important that we know where exactly where political decisions are made at various levels. Pressure groups in democratic countries use a variety of legal techniques, such as campaigning and lobbying, to

influence decision making and achieve their goals. This brings issues of working together and learning from one another. ‘Ten people who speak,’ said Napoleon Bonaparte ‘make more noise than ten thousand who are silent’.

Lobbying is done by individuals and organised groups. Some hire professional lobbyists who use sophisticated and occasional aggressive lobbying techniques to do the work. The Cordoba Foundation in the UK has recently published a useful toolkit, *‘An Introduction to Effective Lobbying and Campaigning’*²⁴ to help people understand lobbying and positively act to use the tool for their benefit and within the law. Although often seen with contempt, it is a legitimate way of exerting political influence in developed countries.

Campaigning and lobbying for certain issues could be the beginning of alliance building, which is based on shared interests and values. This is also an important part of politics. Minority groups or communities often do this in partnership with other forces to preserve their interests and improve their influence. Muslims have been living in their neighbourhoods for decades and working positively with other people on many common issues. With new challenges and opportunities they should continue and expand their partnership work with other civil society bodies, especially those that are fighting for justice, human rights and civil liberty. We are indeed grateful to many individuals and groups for their continuous support to us, especially after we were caught unaware by the political challenges and media prejudice post 9/11 and 7/7. Without their strong support and ordinary people’s sense of humanity, the situation could have been far worse.

Creating a proactive communication strategy

Media are the ears and eyes of modern society. Modern politics, the media and the society have a symbiotic relationship; politicians today are heavily dependent on media and vice versa, for connection with people. I am talking here about the powerful mainstream media; print or electronic, broadsheet or tabloid, national or local. Through media, diplomacy and intelligence-gathering modern powerful countries try to maintain discipline within their nation state and keep their edge over developing nations. They are their soft power. If they are not important, then what is?

With the continuous improvements in technology the sphere of media has been expanding and changing, to the extent that traditional print and electronic media are now struggling to adapt themselves with the demand of time. Social media (facebook, twitter, etc) are particularly popular with the younger generation, the blogosphere has expanded fast, and web-based media are expanding their frontiers. None of them is less important in disseminating the message, positive or negative and altruistic or selfish, to others. Nations, communities or groups ignore the media at their peril.

Many in our community, particularly the youth and professionals, spend hours on social media every day and some simply throw away their invaluable time. How do we encourage some of them to go into mainstream media, both print and electronic, so that they become indispensable part of the media industry and become voices of authority on equality, humanity and justice in the society? Once again, there is no shortcut to this; individuals have to aim high and work hard to achieve their personal best. With some planned coordination they can be a force to reckon with.

²⁴ <http://www.thecordobafoundation.com/publication.php?id=3&art=1>

If we fail to do this the continuous drip feed of Muslim-bashing will go undeterred and the truth about us may one day be lost. Our detractors are quite organised and determined; they have the expertise to twist the facts and create sensations on any news surrounding Muslims. Once competent people with integrity are inside the world of media they would be able to tackle this themselves, alert the society and advise people how best to counter negative media and create positive news vibes.

It is vital that we catch the media bull by the horns now, if we want to maintain some dignity for Islam and Muslims in modern pluralist society. Nobody with a basic understanding of how modern media influence our world would disagree that Muslims are now at the receiving end of negative portrayal. Activist Muslims need to grasp the extent of this media power, the damage it can do if we ignore it, and the benefit it can bring in spreading positive and universal messages. Once this is properly understood, then the natural demand is to invest in making the best use of this vehicle for our service and for the good of all.

Needless to say that we should excel in all branches of the media and learn the art of communication; we need a comprehensive and practical communications strategy in relation to mainstream society, by the mosque leaders and organisational leadership. The aim has to be high. Muslim bodies should stop paying lip service to this demand by doing nothing but issuing often inappropriate statements at times of crisis which hardly reach people outside.

It is also vital we make good use of existing ethnic and faith media; they are important in their own right and can be the ladder for talented journalists to enter into the world of mainstream media.

SETTING PRIORITIES

Muslim 'Community' organisations

Muslim activists and leaders do not have the lack of emotion or shortage of passion to overcome the challenges and to perform better. Established groups are organising events and new organisations are emerging every now and then. There is no dearth of activities in our midst, but the dilemma is they are not taking us forward.

Voluntary organisations, although dependent on 'volunteers', need to exploit business, management, marketing and PR skills. They must learn how to become financially viable. Leaders of these organisations need to learn the art and skills to run them effectively. But is it the case with us?

However, there is no immediate or magic solution, no silver bullet, to recover from our collective under-achievement. It is true that our journey in Britain or other European countries did not start on a level playing field, so it is going to take time to catch up with others who are ahead of us. But it is important to understand that in the marathon of life laziness or care-free attitude cannot be an excuse. In order to move into life's faster lane we need, all at the same time, out of the box thinking, continuous re-assessment of our

performance, strategic approaches to overcoming hurdles and effective implementation of whatever decisions we take. When a family confronts a challenging situation its members, old and young, sit together and find ways to confront it. In the same way, stakeholders in our community need to bring their heads together and initiate serious internal debates to take us forward. We have in our midst many wise, experienced, creative and energetic people; what we need is a collective effort to properly diagnose our situation and chart our way for a better future. We need to harness the best of our talents, irrespective of age, gender, ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

Together we should use the spirit of renewal (tajdeed) to lift our community up to a higher level.

These debates and discussions need to be dispassionate and focused with the big picture vision in mind, as demanded by Islam. Together we should use the spirit of renewal (*tajdeed*) to lift our community up to a higher level.

However, at the heart of these down-to-earth actions leaders of the activist groups need to go back to the drawing board and work out how they would like to run their own organisations most effectively in our time. I am talking here about the two essential pillars of an organisation that make it successful – a) the leadership style, and b) the organisational model. Should Muslim organisations still keep on going with a leadership style which is archaic and directive? Should they keep on being happy with an organisational structure which is too rigid and hierarchical? To me, without adopting leadership styles and organisational structures that are flexible and workable there will be little relevance for Muslim organisations in the future.

Differences in leadership styles and management structures give rise to different organisational cultures and they either pull people towards, or push them away from, an organisation. In an inclusive and massively changing environment they have to be different from what worked in the past or in a stagnant society. The world has moved fast in recent decades, through experiments and experiences. Successful organisations, corporate or voluntary, are renewing themselves continuously and accommodating with time – sometimes setting the agenda and sometimes adjusting with time. A brief outline of these two areas is given below.

Leadership styles

There are various styles of leadership or decision-making process – directive, consultative, participative and delegative. Each style has its place in voluntary organisations, depending on their purpose and type of people in them.

Muslim groups have been traditionally following the ‘command-and-control’ (*Ameer* type) style of leadership. This is generally based on the assumption that the leaders are most knowledgeable and experienced; they tend to set the direction and have the final word. These formal or directive leaders are very much involved with the work and running around day in day out, but they have less time for relationship aspects. Decisions made in the organisation are mostly top-down.

On the contrary, most successful organisations nowadays tend to follow informal

leadership styles. Leaders focus on many simultaneously important areas, attempt to be team players and are sensitive to the values of diversity and inclusion. They are communicative, people-oriented and generally appear to be relaxed. Although very much involved with directing tasks, they try to combine this with an increased focus on the improvement of work and enhancement of interpersonal relations. They are willing to engage and empower people, and to be receptive to change and open to feedback. Internal communication is generally excellent.

Organisational models and culture

An organisational structure can fit within a wide spectrum between a highly structured, hierarchical or regimental one at the one end to a highly informal or loose one at the other. The former represents a military organisation and the latter a network of friends. As far as I am aware, most traditional Muslim organisations fall into the former category. Some have layers of memberships with privileges (or expectations) associated with the hierarchy. The organisational culture it provides is perceived to be exclusivist and non-welcoming. There could be a concealed feeling of elitism amongst the members who are in the upper echelons of such organisations.

Traditional command-and-control leadership styles and rigid organisational structures may still be relevant for sections of Muslims, particularly from the first generations that arrived from countries run by authoritarian regimes, but many in the community's younger generations do not find them attractive. Some join these organisations because of the demands of their family or of a circle of friends and stay for a while as semi-outsiders until the opportunity arises for them to leave.

As a consequence of evolving demography and generational changes Muslim organisations are gradually losing touch with the younger sections of the community. This is particularly the case with those youth who enter into mainstream professional organisations and get exposed to pluralist and inclusive environments. Even those who were active in the Islamic Societies or Students Unions in the higher educational institutions lose their drive when it comes to community activism. They are hardly seen in mosque leadership or community works. This is one of the reasons why traditional Muslim organisations are now suffering from the shortage of fresh blood from the community.

There are however well-organised Islamic Societies or network groups in many corporate bodies where Muslims now have a good presence, for example Deloitte and PwC. I am aware that some of the Islamic groups in these professional bodies are recently trying to expand their work in the community by helping the educational achievements of young children or other social and economic projects; this is indeed a very welcome move. Mainstream Muslim organisations have to be really creative in devising a hybrid style of leadership and flexible structure if they want to attract the talented sections of our community.

CONCLUSIONS

Muslim youth and young professionals in most European countries seem to be getting more volatile and more impatient with our state of affairs for various reasons. Fortunately, during the August 2011 summer's riots in English cities the youth in our community demonstrated their fine character; it was the spirit of Ramadan that must have helped them to stay calm. The successful London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics, where the Muslim community provided vital support in their success and many Muslims contributed as volunteers (Games Makers), brought people of all backgrounds together in national pride.

However, the world is getting ever divided and the global situation is becoming more uncertain. The hate-filled 'Innocence of Muslims' film in the US and violent reactions in some parts of the Muslim world on the 11th anniversary of 9/11 have widened the gap between the proponents of 'freedom of speech' and 'religious conscience'. The extradition of two British citizens, Babar Ahmad and Talha Ahsan, to the US on 5th October 2012 has marginalised a broad section of British society, including many Muslims, who had been shocked by the visible double standard of our political class; a great deal of bitterness and frustration has developed among disenfranchised Muslim citizens who had tried every democratic campaigning method available but failed.

Young people are always impatient for change; they are idealistic, but impressionable. With good guidance and creative ideas their energy can be harnessed for positive action. It is imperative that Muslim civil society creates enough space for these unsettled section. Activist Muslim organisations and mosques must proactively find ways to involve them in innovative community activities and give them challenging tasks to keep them busy and let them flourish.

There are issues with certain social trends and lifestyles that are becoming widespread in modern permissive societies, but this is the reality of recent times, created initially by a few determined people with the art of influence; we should work strategically and patiently with other civil society bodies in creating public opinion that counters or alters them within legal means. Social trends are not permanent; they change over time, when some strong-minded people with innovative ideas initiate a move and make things happen with sheer determination within the law of the land. This is also the spirit of Islam in bringing social change; our Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) adopted a gradual method by convincing people with rationale and exemplary human qualities.

We all must make sure that we create an environment where all sections of our community, including young men and women on the one hand and relatively less visible sections such as those of European extraction on the other, develop a sense of belonging and emotional attachment to our vision of a common good. Our obligation towards our *qaum* and the *ummah* – are both important. Our physical belonging to the society must bring in our warm relationship with its people. Whatever the provocation from the Islamophobes and bigots, we need to show a higher level of dignity through patience and wisdom; we have a stake in the overall good of society.

With physical and emotional belonging come positive interaction, engagement and

inclusive participation and stake-holding in society – in community works, social activities, economic exchanges, culture and politics. The art of doing these professionally makes them highly effective. We need to bring our head and heart together, using head before heart in decision making; when head and heart join for a greater cause they create an incomparable synergy.

Prophets of Allah (peace be upon them all) were integral parts of their society and as loving and caring social campaigners and reformers they spread the message of goodness; The Qur'an mentions that they used to address people around them as 'O my people' (*Ya Qaumi*). Even Prophet Lut (peace be upon him) who migrated from Iraq to Trans-Jordan addressed people there in the same manner – he became part of them. Islam's rapid growth in the beginning was due to the Divine love of its adherents, deep love for people and the unique qualities of its first few generations to make the religion indigenous wherever they arrived. Their love for humanity and exemplary character attracted indigenous people to Islam, like bees to flowers. Heart to heart communication lay at the heart of their successes; *words that come from the heart affect hearts*. We are all the fruits of their loving endeavour. We must ask ourselves where we stand on this.

Effective work with people in the wider society cannot be possible without our and our community's internal unity and strong capacity – in education, employment and other areas of life. Being perpetual under-achievers, not being able to harness the energy of our people and being incapable of tackling social maladies and external challenges cannot take us further. We need to remove them from our way.

We need to move away from our talking phase to a phase of action; we need to act, and act now.

Love for Islam, our community and society can only be meaningful if it is manifested by our dedicated action. We need to move away from our talking phase to a phase of action; we need to act, and act now.

As humans we are all unique and we possess distinct qualities. It is individuals who are going to be accountable to Allah on the Day of Judgement. However, while individual achievement is paramount in Islam, as in any other endeavour like achieving gold in Olympics and Paralympics or in Nobel Prizes, one cannot achieve this pinnacle of success without being part of a bigger whole, for example community, society and country. Disconnected individuals, however successful, will be seen as self-centred individuals. It is vital we understand the need for complementariness.

Today's world is full of challenges, but it has a vast collaborative potential. There are powerful impediments that create an 'us and them' mentality in community and society; but they give us the opportunity to transform these boundaries into frontiers in today's pluralist and inclusive global world. The need of our time is a group of leaders amongst us who, with their drive for innovation and positive action, will lift up the community spirit to serve humanity.

As Muslims we all need an inner spirit within us that should be deep-rooted in Islam and its heritage symbolising the 'pure word' (*kalimah tayyibah*), mentioned in the Qur'an; "Do you not see how Allah has given the example of pure word? It is like a pure tree whose roots are deep in the earth and branches are spread in the sky; it yields its fruit in

every season with the leave of its Lord. Allah gives examples for mankind that they may take heed.”²⁵

It is high time we shake up our thinking, come out of our comfort zone and invest in our people to bring a quality change within us. It is vital we acquire deeper knowledge of Islam, our glorious heritage, modern world and contemporary society. It is critical we navigate carefully in the midst of a permissive, individualistic and commercialised life through our exemplary character built on spirituality,²⁶ love of human beings and Allah’s other creation.

Unless we face the reality and aim high through our superior character and determined action, and unless we feel confident enough to have positive interaction, engagement and inclusive participation and stake-holding in wider society – in neighbourhood and community works, social activities, economic exchanges, culture and politics – there is little for us in the future.

Needless to say, from an Islamic point of view, our duty towards others is unconditional; we are not supposed to expect anything in return. We do this for the pleasure of Allah. So, let us now make a firm resolve to adhere to the Islamic teachings of proactively working for the common good of society. Let us internalise the oft-repeated and timeless reminder from Allah and act upon it to change our present and future, “Truly, God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.”²⁷

²⁵ Qur’an 14:24-25

²⁶ The pursuit of a deeper relationship with Allah by being conscious of all His attributes - through contemplation, meditation, religious practice and positive action for the good of all. In Islamic jargon it is *Ruhaniyyat*.

²⁷ Qur’an 13:11



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