

Don't let counter-terrorism work wrongly condemn entire religions

By Sholto Byrnes



British Prime Minister Theresa May speaks to the Done family during an election campaign visit to their farm in near Overton, north-east Wales. Ben Stansall / AFP

'Society needs to condemn a little more and understand a little less.' The words of the former British prime minister Sir John Major have come to mind over the last few days. He was speaking, in 1993, about crime, but they seem to echo in some of the reactions we have heard in the aftermath of yet another terrorist attack on the UK.

"There is – to be frank – far too much tolerance of extremism in our country. Enough is enough," said Britain's current leader, Theresa May.

"The wells of tolerance are running empty," added the foreign secretary, Boris Johnson.

"We must stop being politically correct and get down to the business of security for our people," tweeted Donald Trump.

If this means that it is essential that all the tools to stop terrorist attacks and radicalisation are in place, few would disagree. New measures may well mean a reduction in civil liberties, more electronic eavesdropping and the like, for intelligence services must be given every means possible to tackle this protean scourge.

In an age when your friendly neighbour could turn out to have been radicalised online and decide to take his life and those of others using just his car as a weapon, the reach and the writ of the state has to run far indeed for it to have any chance of forestalling such attacks.

But there is a big difference between saying that security forces need more powers, and that is the problem, and blaming a community for tolerating extremism.

Let us not forget that both the Manchester bomber, Salman Abedi, and one of the London murderers, Khuram Butt, had been reported to the authorities by friends and associates worried that the men had been radicalised. It seems that neither, however, were deemed high enough priority for continuing

surveillance. That is not to blame the security services; instead it points to a massive increase of resources being necessary if men like Abedi and Butt are to be caught in time in future.

What it does not do is suggest that tolerance of extremism is the reason that these attacks took place. The UK community secretary, Sajid Javid, himself a Muslim, says that British Muslims have a "unique burden" to call out extremism: "It is not enough to condemn. Muslims must challenge too ... We can no longer shy away from those difficult conversations."

Yet it is clear from reporting on their backgrounds that both the men above were "challenged" and had "difficult conversations" at the heart of their communities, in their mosques. The communities did just what Mr Javid is asking them to do and more, since they reported the men. Yet still it is not enough.

There was a time when the hateful preaching of radical extremists like Abu Hamza and Omar Bakri was tolerated, both by their own misguided followers and by the state. (When I asked one Home Office mandarin why the two were not charged, he told me ruefully that they had looked into it and that the law would not allow for prosecution. That was tolerance of a kind that baffled many. Thankfully both are now locked up, Abu Hamza in the US and Bakri in Lebanon.)

But that is in the past. The vast majority of both Britain and its Muslim community have taken an increasingly robust stance against radicalisation and extremism. They may be able to do more, but there are limits to what can be done about lone wolves or marginalised, disaffected people who find meaning and purpose through acts of violence, not through religion. As has been noted before, many who have gone to fight for ISIL or commit atrocities in its name know little about their supposed faith.

If anything, Muslims in the UK have been frustrated by the unwillingness of the authorities to take a harder line on extremists. Khuram Butt, for instance, was hiding in open sight, even appearing in a documentary last year called *The Jihadis Next Door*. The head of one anti-extremist foundation in the UK, Mohammed Shafiq, says: "Many of us in the British Muslim community have been demanding actions against these extremists to no avail. I am not surprised that Khuram Butt carried out the terrorist attack and there are serious questions for the authorities."

There are indeed, and as home secretary with oversight of counter-terrorism for six years before she became prime minister, they should be directed at Theresa May. Enough is enough? Yes, let's take that at face value. Enough underfunding of the security services so that men like Khuram Butt and Salman Abedi don't slip through the net in the future. But no return to the scapegoating of an entire community that has condemned again and again, until they are weary of having to prove their loyalty, the tiny minority foolish or wicked enough to be seduced by extremism.

For that way lies the insidious condemnation of a whole religion; and the words of the politicians stray perilously close to that dangerous territory. Let them remember that if the "wells of tolerance are running empty", they should do so for Islamophobia as much as for any form of extremism.

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