



Opinion Jean Charles de Menezes

This article is more than 17 years old

Building on the foundations

Abdul-Rehman Malik

Will the launch of yet another agency really help police win the trust and cooperation of the Muslim community in tackling the terror threat?

Mon 13 Aug 2007 17.30 BST

Attending primary school in my native Canada, I remember being subjected to all kinds of earnest attempts at social engineering. Nothing was more emblematic of this than the [Safety Scouts](#), a group of hyperactive puppets that were employed to teach us how to survive potentially dangerous encounters with heavy machinery, wild animals and poisonous plants. Reading [Friday's report](#) that the Metropolitan Police, under the leadership of Assistant Commissioner [Tarique Ghaffur](#), was planning to set up a "safety foundation" triggered childhood memories. I couldn't help but think this was an(other) effort to turn British Muslims into eager, willing, self-reporting "safety scouts".

The foundation's planned work will include pinpointing extremists in the UK, understanding the "dynamic of disaffection", sorting out failing Islamic institutions, encouraging leaders to speak out more and convincing ordinary Muslim to "self-report" terror threats. It is ambitious in scale, but unimaginative in scope. Truth is that Ghaffur's wishlist is already being tackled by many Muslim groups, think-tanks and voluntary sector organisations. The difference is that the "safety foundation" will work within a security apparatus that is increasingly looked at with apprehension.

Recent history - the family of Jean Charles de Menezes still waiting for justice even as assistant commissioner [Andy Hayman](#) remains in post despite [misleading](#) senior officers about the fatal shooting; the Association of Chief Police Officers president's suggestion that terror suspects should be subject to open-ended pre-charge detention; and Counter Terrorism Command head Peter Clarke's acknowledgement that public trust in police intelligence was quickly eroding - does not build confidence. Given Hammersmith borough commander Ali Dizaei's contention that police don't have a clear strategy on dealing with terrorism to begin with, I wonder how many heads were being scratched at Scotland Yard on Friday, as they read for the first time that their force was the setting up a "safety foundation".

With Muslim communities constantly being pressured to answer the calls of pundits and politicians alike about who best represents them, it's now time for British Muslims to turn the table and ask who exactly best represents the authorities. If Scotland Yard can't get its own counter-terrorism strategy in order, how will it persuade Muslim communities to "do more"?

Abdurahman Jafar, spokesman for the [Muslim Safety Forum](#) (MSF), is right to be annoyed. The Forum has been at the forefront of engaging and advising the police on a range of key issues from community relations to counter terrorism. Unlike many other Muslim organisations, the MSF is a broad church. Few Muslim advocacy organisations have been able to cobble together such a wide-ranging coalition, encompassing almost the entire spectrum of Muslim opinion - from anti-Gitmo activists [Cage Prisoners](#), to the government-lauded [British Muslim Forum](#).

It's a unique and important group - and Ghaffur knows it. He and other senior officers spoke at an MSF-sponsored emergency meeting held in East London in the aftermath of the attempted car bomb attacks in London and Glasgow. The meeting was full of praise for London's Muslim communities and warm fuzzies about working together to defeat the terror threat. It would have been an ideal time to talk about the "safety foundation". Nothing about the proposal was mentioned.

It all makes the "safety foundation" sound ad hoc. Activists can be forgiven for being cynical when something meant to have grassroots impact is pitched as a top-down initiative driven by security services and intelligence gatherers. If we accept Peter Clarke's [assessment](#) that there is "an inexorable trend towards more ambitious and more destructive attack planning", then the real focus should be on partnership and strengthening community institutions from the ground up, supporting the intrinsic resources of communities to inform criminal investigations linked to terrorism.

It's an open secret that a high proportion of calls to the police offering information on potential terrorist activity comes from British Muslims. Yet, in the calls for "self-reporting", this fact is rarely acknowledged.

Just as the MSF was left out of the "safety foundation" blueprint, there seems to be some amnesia at Scotland Yard about its own unique in-house

efforts to engage with Muslim communities: the [Muslim Contact Unit](#) (MCU). Formed in January 2002, the MCU has pioneered a partnership approach that has gone directly to segments of the London Muslim community [most alienated](#) by the "war on terror" rhetoric and also most vulnerable to al-Qaida-style messaging.

As detective inspector Bob Lambert, head of the MCU, [recently wrote](#): "Young Muslim community workers who might become key partners in the battle against terrorist propaganda will be further alienated if they are approached instead as potential informants. Partnership means working transparently with communities to build trust and confidence; source recruitment is coercive and weakens community confidence."

The MCU has made the connection between resorting to extra-judicial powers and unintentionally increasing support for terrorism. Lambert concludes, "Although there is a clear police appetite for Muslim community support, there has sometimes been a reluctance to acknowledge the extent to which counter-terrorism policy and strategy (together with aspects of operational activity) often militates against the objective."

It's a refreshing and challenging perspective. Alas, the MCU is only a small part of the Met's counter-terrorism equation. In the faultlines between [Prevent and Pursue](#), such nuanced perspectives often get lost.

It is possible that we are missing something and that more information on the nascent foundation will put concerns to rest. Even so, the initiative seems much more suited to the growing ["Islam industry"](#) - in which a nice little think-tank where retired police chiefs go to inform security policy would surely be a welcome addition.

Terrorism is a criminal act. Tackling it is an obvious concern for all. The police have a difficult job as it is and ought to focus on making sure that the left hand knows what the right hand is doing. Muslim communities in particular have shown a great deal of openness to security services, even while campaigning bitterly against (and feeling the impact of) new anti-terrorism measures. The police ought to respond by strengthening grassroots relationships and expanding a progressive, sophisticated approach to partnership that sees beyond hyperbolic rhetoric and stays focused on the objective of achieving safety and security for all.

Most viewed