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

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Rosemary Hollis:

In case you didn't know, but I think you would be a little bit acquainted with the speaker, because of coming here, Robert Lambert was former special branch detective. And in his book, on sale here tonight, *Countering Al Qaeda in London*, Dr Lambert compares counter-terrorism strategies in the capital with those adopted elsewhere in Europe and North America. And he describes a successful partnership or number of partnerships between police and Muslims in London that provide a template for future international counter-terrorism strategy.

And he has a robust response. I hope we're going to hear some of it, to domestic and international critics who regard his partnership approach as appeasing extremists.

I didn't introduce myself, I'm now Professor of Middle East Policy Studies at City University, but I had quite a long life here at Chatham House inclusive of several years after 9/11 and then 7/7. And I'm intrigued to hear from him how this partnership worked, or these partnerships worked, because from my perspective, we didn't get the impression that such partnerships existed, let alone that they were delivering behind the scenes.

So, Robert Lambert, please.

Robert Lambert:

Thank you very much, Rosemary, and thank you everyone at Chatham House for the very kind invitation. It's a great pleasure to be here on the platform. Over the years, particularly when I was working for Metropolitan Police Special Branch, I was often able to be in the audience, often at lunch times or for these evening events.

And I probably should start by framing this approach to partnerships. Framing it I think in the context of very topical debates on multiculturalism. And if I may, I'll just quote from a debate in the House of Lords last week. And I'm specifically going to just briefly quote Lord Judd. Some of you may recall Lord Frank Judd was a minister in the Harold Wilson government back in the 1960s. Some of you, like me, will remember that period.

And it's probably worth saying something about multiculturalism. I think if we're honest, Londoners of my age and older... of course we often do get nostalgic for a London that is past, a London that is long gone, when in the 60s we might go innocently train-spotting because then there were steam engines and really no one thought we were particularly odd having that

interest and pastime. We might go to football matches; we might go to Chelsea, Stamford Bridge. We might not have to pay enormous sums of money to get in and we might still see sort of what now seems a very old-fashioned game of football.

So I have a lot of sympathy for nostalgia for when London was a very different place, but I think Lord Judd who is a little older still is very right when he says, 'Globalisation is a tough reality. One of its consequences is a sense of powerlessness among increasing numbers of people who feel marginalised and threatened. We therefore have to be very careful about condemning the concept of multiculturalism. My own conviction from years of working in this sphere is that multiculturalism can enable people to find a sense of belonging and significance.

'The challenge is to lead on from that sense of identity and belonging to the realisation that the problems of the world cannot be solved by individual communities. They can be solved only by co-operation. The challenge, therefore, is not to deny multiculturalism but to lead it into dialogue about the realities of the very difficult complexity of modern society and the need for all of us to co-operate.'

In the first section of my book, it's divided into four sections, it's a journey. But unlike Tony Blair's journey it's a very local journey. And I think it's worthy of some comparison with Tony Blair's journey in his book. Obviously there's a very similar focus on 9/11 and the important impact of that, but in my local journey, in fact it's a very specific tube journey, you'll be relieved to know that very little action takes place on the tube. But it is, I think, a very useful connection. It's the Victoria Line. Many of you will have spent probably too many hours on it, cumulatively, hopefully not all in one go.

And yet I felt it was useful, because the first section of the book is King's Cross, and I'm sure we've all had a range of experiences in King's Cross. For myself and my colleagues on the Muslim Contact Unit, which was a very small unit, and I think one of the reasons why Rosemary wasn't aware of our work is just simply because we were so small. I think from Day 1 I think we operated against the grain of the war on terror, which of course was launched round about the same time as our unit. And I think perhaps because of our experience, a unique experience perhaps within Metropolitan Police Special Branch, we were also able to operate at times beneath the radar of the war on terror.

And so it was that really King's Cross I think was the place where we discovered that partnership was the real way forward. We were looking for

Muslim community leaders who had particular skill and expertise in the wake of 9/11. I mean really, we didn't expect that many Muslim community leaders, mosque leaders, representatives, we didn't really expect that many would have really expert understanding of al-Qaeda and what caused and what consequences for London, 9/11. But nevertheless, I think we had some prior knowledge.

In my case, I think when 9/11 happened, I think unlike Tony Blair who saw this as a new beginning, Tony Blair not once did he think back to his own role in Northern Ireland. To me it still seems extraordinary. But he's very clear in his account that his experience dealing with counter-terrorism in Northern Ireland, he made very clear that it's not relevant. This is new, this is new terrorism. Everything now has changed. And evidence of his remarkable opportunism, remarkable intuition, I think, as he came back on the train from Brighton to London having seen the images that we all remember on 9/11. And not even a thought that his party conference took place in the same hotel that was bombed and almost killed Margaret Thatcher just a few years earlier, or at least for people like me, it only seemed like a few years earlier.

Yes, I think we did, myself, my colleagues, sometimes we'd come into the office at King's Cross, there might only be three of us, but even if there was three of us, I think we still managed a cumulative counter-terrorist experience of around 100 years. Which I don't say that was always a good thing.

But what it did mean was that we'd learnt. And I think that the policing culture that we were fortunate enough to grow up in in Metropolitan Police Special Branch was one where frankly you could make mistakes. You learnt from mistakes and so I don't think it was such the risk-averse culture that I think sadly aspects of policing, counter-terrorism policing has become since then. And interestingly, where were we? We were in King's Cross. You'd just walk out the old police station, memorials for a whole range of revolutionary figures, from 100 years previously. Whether Karl Marx or others, some of whom sadly had aspirations for and connections to revolutionary violence, political violence.

So I think for Special Branch officers, 9/11 didn't mean that everything had changed. I think it meant that we still had political violence. We still had people that wanted to bomb London, albeit using different methods. But one of the interesting things I think that emerged when making these comparisons was the fact that often when you're actually dealing with the actual problem of bombs, one of your first interests is not the ideology that may or may not be a guiding feature.

But it is the tactics and the skill, and I am able in this section to address some of the fascinating interactions between counter-terrorists who are concerned with the skill and the tactics of terrorists, and the terrorists who are equally concerned with the tactics and skills of their opponents. And occasionally that comes together. And some of the very best academic research that I've encountered subsequently deals with that powerful interaction. And when you're dealing with tactics, I think it can be sobering. It can help to steer you away from some of the, I think some of the sometimes less connected research that talks exclusively about ideology.

And so it was for me. The first attack on the World Trade Centre in 1993 was immensely significant. I couldn't find, and I still can't find any major difference in motivation between the bombers who successfully bombed the World Trade Centre in 1993 and the bombers who successfully bombed the Twin Towers those years later. And I still can't find, and at the time and I think it's important to say that myself and colleagues, of course we didn't appear on public platforms in 2002, 2003. But I hope the book will show consistency of conduct. We were always delivering consistent messages and sometimes unwelcome messages to government about what is good counter-terrorism, what is less effective counter-terrorism.

And why was it that politicians really, really didn't want to know? What were the deficiencies in the 1993 investigation of the attack on the World Trade Centre? When FBI investigators came to London, I was able to assist them. They conducted an immaculate FBI investigation and naturally Metropolitan Police provided assistance. I'm not going to bore you with all the details, and of course you may well argue – many have argued and will continue to argue against me – that actually 9/11 was of a magnitude that meant that those sort of prior very criminally perfect investigations into terrorist crime were no longer viable propositions.

I think on the contrary, if only we'd stuck to those tried and tested methods, sometimes very painstaking. Especially when you're dealing with investigations, criminal investigations that are transnational. Very very difficult. But when you think of all the resources that have gone in opposite directions – the direction of the war on terror, the investment in military responses, the investment in extra judicial responses, the investment in Guantanamo Bay, etcetera. I won't continue. You get the... If only some of that, and some of that expertise that I think we had, that practitioners had, I think the last 10 years may have been more productive in terms of effective counter-terrorism.

Well, we move on from King's Cross only two stops, northbound up the Victoria Line to Finsbury Park. And I think this was where some of these real partnerships that I think have application worldwide came into play. And I commend the second section of the book to you, not least because it probably is the first attempt to describe events at Finsbury Park as best as any inside account. But I checked with goodness knows how many former police colleagues in terms of accuracy, members of the community.

So I don't suppose for one minute it's perfect, but I hope that it is less sensational than the book *The Suicide Factory*. And I hope that it's fairer than two books that really did spur me into action. And this is where I have to thank academics, both at St Andrews but particularly at Exeter where, and I'm delighted that Jonathan Githens-Mazer is here. One of the very patient academics of Exeter who have tried and probably will continue to try not entirely successfully to somehow convert me into an old deadbeat Special Branch DI, into some kind of academic. I mean, it's an admirable ambition and I hope I'm making some progress.

I think it probably needs – and it will need – real academics to help still to sort of translate some... I mean at best, my work and the work on Finsbury Park that you'll find in the book, at best I hope it's an honest attempt to describe what we thought, the police officers, and in particular I think the Muslim police officers who were enormously brave at times. Enormously brave. It's all right for someone like me, I finish a day's work in Special Branch, I get on the train at Euston and I return to a kind of a safe haven.

But if you're a Muslim police officer and your home is Forest Gate, you never get away from it. And you get... On the journey home, I remember one evening, an incredibly dedicated, effective and brave Muslim police officer returning home to East London. Getting on the train, he gets abused by what we might call 'white van men', or today we might call English Defence League men, for being some kind of terrorist. You know, well, he looks like Osama bin Laden. You know, vial abuse. And sometimes getting close to violence. But I think the fact that Metropolitan Police skills, negotiation skills always come in handy at these times.

There was one lout, you know, abusive lout, accusing one of my Muslim police colleagues in these terms one night. I think he was a bit drunk, so that could be mitigation, but he sobered up very quickly when the Muslim police officer showed him his police warrant card. And he said, 'Inspector bin Laden, to you.'

On another occasion, I was asked to come in and defend one of my Muslim police officers. This was on the way to Finsbury Park. I said, 'No, this is old school Special Branch. No, we don't get involved, we don't actually arrest people. No, no, no.' But the officer was understandably upset. So reluctantly I intervened. But I learned then how easy it is to educate young people, these were a couple of young scaffolders, again who thought that my Muslim police colleague was some threat to the safety of London. And it was really very easy to educate them.

I think the difficulties in education have come at the top level, unfortunately. And so this leads me on to the problems that I've faced. I think they're good problems to have. I think in 2006, the two books spurred me into action. And again, I hope my academic guides have at least taken away some element of the sense that, well this is Bob just responding to his critics.

In one book, Melanie Phillips... the book is *Londonistan*, some of you may have read it. 2006, I think. In that and some of her other work she refers to my work as being very much a case of appeasement. A sad sign of the weakness of London policing. I mean, it never felt like that at the time. And I read her book and then I read almost straight after another book published that year by Michael Gove, *Celsius 7/7*.

[inaudible comment in audience]

Oh yes, yes! Oh gosh, no. At the time, I could see there was genuine anger and frustration coming from Melanie Phillips and Michael Gove. And I still feel now, I think to myself, well if only they could have seen what I've seen. But I don't think it's too late. I think if they could come to Finsbury Park, you know... surely this is a problem still.

I hope this doesn't sound facetious, but it struck me again recently when I was in Tower Hamlets and there's a wonderful group of Muslims around Tower Hamlets who are very effective when you have, you know, the English Defence League want to come to Tower Hamlets to deal with the extremists. Actually, the so-called extremists are wonderful partners of police in Tower Hamlets. And so I thought then, you know, it's only a short journey from Westminster. Of course it takes me off the Victoria Line, I'm conscious of that, in terms of the book, it takes us onto the District Line. But it's not far away.

And I do think that if Melanie Phillips, Michael Gove even, now I do feel that if they came and met the people that they, the Muslims, the groups that they're so concerned about, I really do think that they would... I think they would have to accept that the centrality of their complaint is not justified. They say, and they say to me, Muslim partners of the Muslim Contact Unit are akin to the

BNP. Are akin to the British National Party. So the individuals that came to my retirement do, I'm pleased to see some of you in the audience tonight, also came to that happy event in 2007. But I really fail to see any basis at all on which any of those outstandingly brave and loyal Londoners, who just happen to be Muslims, how they are in any way akin to Nick Griffin. And I spend a fair amount of time in the book really looking at that evidence. I certainly don't dismiss it. And I do think, and I'm sure most police officers now would agree with me, that if it were true, if someone was really akin to Nick Griffin, then as a police officer you would not want to work in partnership with them.

However effective they might be against al-Qaeda, or in the case of Nick Griffin, the argument goes, well, Nick Griffin no doubt if the problem was with violence coming from fringe right-wing groups, groups like Combat 18 or individuals like Anders Breivik, the argument goes... Well if Nick Griffin could help the police, well Nick Griffin should be employed as an informant and not granted the legitimacy that partnership status affords.

Well, I hope you find – if you do find the time to read the book – I hope you find really compelling evidence that it doesn't stack up. I mean, I won't go through it all, but perhaps I should just pick up on the issue of attitudes towards the gay community. I mean, this seems to be one of the strongest complaints. And I do believe that it is genuinely held by many... I mean it may even be that some of the young people who get drawn into the English Defence League, it may even be that they believe this genuinely... I don't know. I hold no brief for them.

However, really powerful evidence to the contrary. Whether it's in Finsbury Park, whether it's in Brixton, which is the third chapter of my book, where some of the Muslims in Brixton who just happen to be Salafi or Salafi-oriented, and often are described as having negative views towards women, negative views towards the gay community. Well, you should go there. I must admit, at first I was intrigued. I thought, well this will be interesting to see.

But when you actually see the positive engagement with all local communities, whether they're Christian, whether they're gay... and of course, I mean some of these stereotypes around the women. The fact is, in Brixton there is probably evidence that isn't widely looked at, where Muslim women have embraced this version of Islam because they have been or they have felt oppressed in a more secular lifestyle.

It's not for police to pass judgement on these matters. It's for police to engage with communities as they are. If communities are as bad as the BNP, then I

accept it. I hope you find throughout the book that there is some compelling evidence against that.

To conclude this sort of local tube journey. I mean, what does it tell us about potential internationally? I think after the Arab Spring, I think it offers us a lot of hope. I would hope in the years ahead that we might well be able to persuade Chatham House to have conferences here where we look at the potential for partnerships across the board.

Let me just pick out one example to conclude with, looking ahead to the future. I think all of the Muslim partners, organisations, individuals that I worked with in London, I think without exception, they were all very exercised by the plight of the Palestinians. And I should say, exercised in a particular way. Exercised, not solely or particularly about the politics, but exercised about the plight. That is to say, exercised by what is happening to the Palestinians in the refugee camps. You know, Palestinians who are often forgotten. Palestinians in the refugee camps in Lebanon and in Jordan. As well as the headline issues.

I'll conclude with, if I may, with the work of Interpal, because it's a great pleasure that Ibrahim Hewitt is here this evening, the Chairman of Interpal. And the work, the compassion and the importance of the work of Interpal, who have been described as a terrorist charity. I mean this is so far from the reality. And it was for me, it was a wonderful pleasure, it was a professional duty but it was also a pleasure, to be able to spend so many days, so many hours and days at the Interpal office.

Sometimes, and actually initially, and this is no coincidence, I mean my first visit to the Interpal office was because they had been attacked, in 2002. I mean, since 2002, I visited over 200 mosques and Muslim organisations that have been attacked. Many of them firebombed, sometimes as in the case of Interpal, bricks thrown through the window.

But I leave this, just to conclude, leave you with this thought. If only British politicians would begin to think about the injustices that exist in this case, think about the outstanding work that Interpal and so many other Muslim groups have done in this arena. Because it does have a huge counter-terrorist benefit. It really does.

Abu Hamza, who is now thankfully in prison, who was very much in control at Finsbury Park mosque for the period that I deal with in my book, Abu Hamza hated Muslims giving their money to Interpal. He hated the work of Interpal. He hated the work of the local MP Jeremy Corbyn who would mobilise Muslims on the Palestinian issue, who would mobilise Muslims on stop the

war marches. He hated that, because for him to recruit young Muslims into the al-Qaeda world, and it has to be said, I think now the evidence is much clearer that, far from being the clown of Finsbury Park, he was very much at the heart of work that saw many, many young Muslims of this country getting involved in terrorism and violence.

So we really do have to change course. I think the Arab Spring provides that opportunity for us, and not least, and this is very much the final word from me... I just went through the list, the 40 or 45 Muslims who came to my retirement do at New Scotland Yard, apart from the fact that I think most of them are now reclassified by the Government as being somehow violent, sorry, non-violent extremists, which I fail to understand.

But interestingly, at least ten of them had been tortured by regimes. Let's just quickly and finally mention Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt... I think the fact that their status was so often undermined in this country. You know, individuals who were regularly demonised as somehow being terrorists. Actually, when you look at it, all they were doing in their youth in countries like Tunisia was fighting for their political rights in ways that I think now the British Government is applauding.

Thank you very much for your attention.