

Dear chair, ladies and gentleman,

I am Mohammed Kozbar, Chairman of Finsbury Park Mosque in North London in the UK. No doubt some of you will have heard of this mosque mainly due to its troubled history.

In this short presentation I wish to talk a little bit about the work of the mosque and my involvement with it in responding to hatred, racism and Islamophobia.

The current mosque on North London was opened to the public in 1993, at a ceremony attended by Prince Charles. Unfortunately the mosque was forcibly under the control of some extremists linked to Abu Hamza from 1997 to 2005. This was a dark period for the mosque and the local community as these individuals, unrepresented of mainstream Islam, used the premises to promote their ideology of hate, confrontation and disunity. Thankfully, the extremists were ousted by the community in February 2005 in partnership with the authorities.

Since 2005, and with the support of the local Muslim community, there has been a complete overhaul of the mosque's leadership. Consequently, attendance has greatly increased and the range of services has steadily expanded. We pride in the fact that it is no longer just a mosque but a community hub for all, irrespective ethnic or religious backgrounds. We have an active engagement provision for dialogue, interfaith work and community cohesion. Some of our projects like: feeding the homeless, Visit My Mosque Day, youth & Women work, we even have won the Visible Accreditation Quality Award, which is the first for any Muslim organisations and the third for any faith-based groups.

Despite our achievements, our proven track of community engagement, and confronting extremism, we are still subjected to hate crimes and Islamophobic attacks. Our mosque has been on more than one occasion vandalised; pigs heads stuck on our gate;

premises set on fire; and recently we have witnessed a series of acid attacks on Muslims in London. Consequently some of our congregation members especially women live in fear, many of them stop taking their children to schools alone or use the public transportation. Unfortunately, Women observing the Hijab are easy targets.

On [17 June 2017](#), the Islington Faiths Forum (which we is a member of) held the Great Get Together ceremony, to remember Joe Cox Member of Parliament, who was brutally killed by a Far Right extremist. Only two days later, we witnessed a terrorist attack in the Finsbury Park area near our mosque where innocent People leaving late night Ramadan prayers from the mosques were attacked by a man in a van who mowed them down. One elderly man was killed and scores injured – some still languishing in hospital [today](#).

As responsible community leaders, we had to work hard to explain to our youth who were the main victims of this attack, and the local community not to respond in retaliation, as this will bring further harm to the community. Instead we encouraged all to live their lives as normal yet remain vigilant; also to let the police do their job. We also tried to underline that extremists of all persuasions are to be totally rejected and that they do not represent the community or faith to profess to be acting on behalf of. These extremists whether those who commit the attack in Finsbury Park area or those who commit the attacks in London Bridge, Manchester and recently in Spain and Finland, their aim is to divide our communities and create a back clash between them, we will not let them win over us, and this what exactly we have done in Islington as communities.

And whilst the attack near our mosque was so tragic and a shock to the community, but if anything good and positive has come out of this, it is that the community has come together stronger and

united to confront the extremists and the peddlers of hate. This was evidenced by the activities on the ground by people of all faith and none, following the attack, for example messages of solidarity, offer of help and advice, flowers and vigils, donation of money and solidarity protests.

This is the kind of relationship we all hope to have between all communities, it is a collective responsibility, and this cannot happen without working together, especially between communities and the governments.

When we had the opportunity to get involved in a positive way, we managed to bring back FPM to the community within one day. We have a fantastic relationship with our local authority, our Member of Parliament Jeremy Corbyn, the police but relations with central government is lacking. We hope this will change and we have seen recently some positive signs of that.

A research for the government's social mobility watchdog published by The Guardian recently found Islamophobia was holding back British Muslims in workplace as one in five Muslim adults in full-time work compared with 35% of overall population.

Widespread Islamophobia, racism and discrimination means Muslim adults are far less likely to be in full-time work.

The study found 19.8% of Muslims aged 16-to-74 were in full-time employment, compared with 34.9% of the overall population.

In light of the findings, Muslims in Britain will find it more difficult to integrate into the wider society. We are all keen to make sure that our community is integrated, but we are talking here about integration, not assimilation. By integration, we don't

mean we have to shave our beard should we chose to keep on, or for women wearing the hijab to remove it. The focus should be on contributing to society and being active members of the community socially, economically and in civic and political engagement. We are proud to be Muslim and British or European, there is no contradiction what soever.

Our community wants to live like any other, without having to face discrimination in work or education.

Yes in every community there are a tiny minority extremist elements, and we as Muslims are no different. We are dealing with the fringe elements within our midst but their presence should not be used to demonise the entire Muslim community, in the same way Christian Far Right extremists do not represent Christianity, and those who currently slaughter Muslims in Burma do not represent Buddhist.

Many Muslim organisations are in forefront of fighting extremism, yet these same organisations get labelled as non-violent extremists. We are certainly non-violent, we are not extremist, we are simply people of faith. *A new research* by lecturers at the Universities of Bristol and Manchester respectively, finds that "Muslims who attend mosques feel more British not less, the more British Muslims practice their religion and attend mosques, the more engaged and integrated they are with society." The research found.

It is imperative that we openly discuss the reasons that drive young Muslims to terrorism, without fear of being charged with sympathising or justifying those acts of barbaric criminality. Otherwise, we will forever be fighting fires, rather than extinguishing the original flame. Whether it be socio-economic factors that create particular conditions, feelings of alienation which could be exploited by preachers of hate, a political and media narrative that is carries the undertones of

racism and anti-Muslim trends which increases the sense of isolation and intimidation, or foreign policy which drives a wedge through the components of our society, it is important that we fully understand before we can claim to be fighting the fight for moderation and peace.

In closing, allow me to add two further facts:

Firstly, contrary to the denials of some media pundits, Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hysteria is a fact, and not an imagined abstract concept. Islamophobia leads to destruction of life and property – and also creates a climate of fear.

Secondly, Finsbury Park Mosque and many other Muslim organisations have been confronting extremists within our community for a long time. The fact that Abu Hamza and his extremist followers were ousted from our mosque over 13 years ago, is testament to this fact. Sadly, despite these facts, the British Muslim community has received more than its fair share of unfair treatment. Many of our organisations and mosques remain classified as non-violent extremists. Muslims abhor and unconditionally reject violence. We therefore urge governments, the media and others who are concerned with the issue of extremism to genuinely engage with Muslim organisations and mosques in a meaningful way to confront this menace in our midst. To realise this, and to protect vulnerable communities like ours, it is imperative that necessary government legislation is in place. We ask for fairness, not favours.

Thank you,