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Responding to Religiously-Inspired Terror: Mayor Sadiq Khan on the London Attacks

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, gave an exemplary interview in response to the recent London terror attack that politicians should emulate in speaking in these situations, and on what needs to be done.

Commentary

On 22 MARCH 2017, a lone wolf attacker drove into pedestrians on Westminster Bridge before attempting to enter the British parliament. He was shot dead while three pedestrians were killed on the bridge, and one police officer was stabbed and died. For London, like many major cities, the question had been when, not if, such an attack occurred; security procedures were quickly initiated with increased police patrols including armed officers.

However, the immediate hard defence procedures, while essential, are not what reduces the risk of attacks. Mayor Sadiq Khan in his interview on BBC Radio 4's Today programme the following morning stressed resilience and harmony, as well as the need for the police and security forces to work in partnership with the public.

The Political Voice

Such attacks have become part of life in many places, and politicians are becoming more adept at responding. After 9/11 2001, Western politicians gave out a slightly confused message, which needed clarification in the following days, concerning the relationship of Islam to the situation. That it was a 'war on terror' and not a war on Islam was reiterated, but some of the language used had muddied this water.

In his interview, Khan did not raise the issue about this being potentially an act of terrorism in which the attacker would seek to claim legitimacy by an appeal to some form of radical ideology claiming foundations in Islam. Rather, he spoke about the need for citizens of all religions, and those of none, to live together and stand united shoulder to shoulder against those who try and spread discord.

That Khan did not make this about Islam as he spoke is very positive, because this takes the focus away from any sense that the problem lies there, which would be the case even if he singled it out for defence and support.

Responding to Questions on Islam

While Khan did not raise the issue about Islam being used as a motivation, his interviewer directly asked him about the connection to Islam, even stating that all the terror attacks which were occurring were done in its name. Khan responded by noting that as a Muslim himself he recognised that such incidents were not based in what he termed “real Islam”.

He reiterated that in London people of all religions lived in peace and harmony, and explicitly spoke against those who took the views that Muslims should not be friends with Christians, or that they should be antagonistic to Jews; such notions are not found in the example of Islam’s prophet nor in the tradition.

However, he could have gone further and noted that many terror attacks are enacted by right-wing actors, often linked to racism, anti-Semitism, or Islamophobia. The media discourse that links terrorism, or even the majority of terror attacks, to Islam tends to give a very distorted picture. The number of attacks and deaths from terror in most, if not all, Western countries have not occurred from those who claim a motivation in Islam.

Counter Narratives

The mayor also noted, importantly, that it was not enough to simply offer negative rebuttals of the extremists who promote terror. Rather, a positive narrative is needed that can inspire people. The protection that Prophet Muhammad offered to Christians and Jews during his lifetime, as well as friendships across religious boundaries from his date until today, show that a different stance is not just possible but in accord with Islam needs to be shown and promoted.

Young Muslims need such positive examples, while they will counter the often distorted vision offered by some populist politicians and the anti-Islam rhetoric of activists who distort for their own agenda. Communities and politicians need to voice this openly, forcefully, and repeatedly to counter extremism of all shades.

Another challenge that the interviewer put to Khan was that his directives to cut back on the very controversial stop and search police powers should now be reversed. Indeed, she suggested that we needed more not less of this to stop future attacks. The mayor did not reply directly, but very correctly spoke about the importance of

good relations with all communities in his city, and noted that many potential attacks in the last few years have been thwarted by information from the public.

Giving the message that the government and police do not trust one part of the community, or singling them out for what are widely seen as unfair and intrusive measures is the kind of thing which is likely to make radicalisation more likely, and feed into extremist narratives. Working with the communities, however, undermines such narratives, and as Mayor Khan noted, in situations of trust and mutual respect, intelligence can be passed from the public to the authorities. One-sided securitisation is certainly not the way forward.

Putting Across Wider Narrative

The voices and actions of politicians alone cannot stop terror attacks, however, the way that politicians speak in public and the way that their policies are seen and received in public are a very significant aspect of wider narratives and discourses in this area. As noted, the mayor of London showed an extremely effective way that such voices come across. Four factors can be applied both to specific statements or interviews, as well as wider policy initiatives and actions:

First, addressing unity across traditions and communities rather than speaking about or naming a specific community. Second, when the question of Islam was raised he directly addressed problematic narratives about that tradition, but brought it back to wider community relations. As noted though he could have corrected the interviewer's false stance that all terror attacks are about Islam.

Third, he spoke about the need for counter narratives, which is of course part of a much wider project and one that should also address right-wing racist extremism, which many now see as the West's greatest threat. Fourth, the need for community cohesion and trust is more important than securitisation in preventing such attacks, and certainly is essential for long-term developments. These four points are certainly not comprehensive of everything that needs to be done, but are some key foundations.

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