

Europe's Muslims grapple with touchy issue: is terrorism a community problem?

by [Peter Ford](#) in the [August 2, 2017](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* When 200 British Muslim imams declared that they would refuse to say funeral prayers for the perpetrators of the recent terrorist attack near London Bridge, their statement marked a striking and unprecedented rejection of terrorism.

“We don’t take this matter very lightly,” said Qari Asim, an imam in the northern city of Leeds, who signed the declaration. “We believe that the terrorists should not be accepted in our community, in life or in death. We are trying everything possible to deter people” from violence.

The move signaled a significant change of tack. For many years, the almost universal reaction among European Muslims to the rising tide of jihadi violence has been to disclaim any responsibility on the part of Islam and the Islamic community.

But the attacks in Manchester and London “have shaken the Muslim community [in Britain] very deeply,” said Ziauddin Sardar, a London-based scholar of Islamic history. Now, Muslim leaders are beginning tentatively to acknowledge that their communities cannot shrug off all liability for the recent spate of terrorist attacks across Western Europe. “Our first task is to own up and acknowledge that these people emerge from the Islamic community.”

The imams’ decision not to bury the perpetrators came after British prime minister Theresa May, speaking in the wake of a knife attack near London Bridge that killed eight people, said that there was “far too much tolerance of extremism in our country.”

But European Muslims, divided between many schools of thought and traditions, are unlikely to unite around a single approach to terrorism.

Demanding that Muslims address the scourge in the name of Islam “would imply that Muslims are potentially terrorists, and we don’t accept that premise,” said Imran Shah, a board member of the Islamic Society of Denmark. “We will not accept orders from someone pointing his finger at us saying, ‘This is your fault.’”

But Sajid Javid, British communities minister, who is a Muslim, argued in a recent op-ed article in the *Times* that British Muslims bear a “unique burden” to tackle extremism. “It is not enough to condemn. Muslims must challenge, too,” he wrote. “We can no longer shy away from those difficult conversations.”

Naz Shah, a Labor Party member of Parliament from Bradford in northern England, says that her Muslim constituents have overcome their reservations and that “they are having conversations about empowering communities” to face up to extremists.

But she rejects the idea that Muslims tolerate terrorism. The Manchester suicide bomber, Salman Abedi, had been reported to police by friends and neighbors on three separate occasions, she points out.

In France, too, the tone of the debate is changing, said Rachid Benzine, a member of a government commission studying imams’ education. “In the past people were saying that terrorism either had nothing to do with Islam, or everything to do with Islam,” and nothing to do with adolescent rootlessness, Western policy in the Middle East, social discrimination at home, or other contributing factors, he recalls.

Now, he says, “there is a recognition that jihadism is a product of both international problems and of the way Islam has been ideologized.”

Though Muslim public intellectuals may think like that, many preachers in French neighborhood mosques “are hesitant to criticize” extremists “because they are afraid of stigmatizing the whole religion,” Benzine said. “But there is no way around this; they have to do it.”

In Britain, Asim said Muslim leaders are taking up those cudgels. “We used to ignore those verses” in the Qur’an that urge Muslims to kill non-Muslims—the ones that Islamic State preachers seize on—he said. “But we need to talk about them and explain to students that they are part of the Qur’an but that they do not apply today because they refer to a particular historical context that is not the same today.”

But a knowledge of Islam is not enough to combat extremism, said Dounia Bouzar, founder of the first counter-radicalization program approved by the French government. Imams are not trained to spot the warning signs, she worries, and they may in fact be the least well-placed to help someone in the process of being radicalized.

“The first thing jihadi recruiters do is cut a young man off from his mosque and his community, so that they are his only interlocutors,” Bouzar said. “It makes him easier to brainwash.”

Bouzar is trying to spur debate among French Muslims about the growing role that quietist Salafists play in Muslim society. Though they reject violence, they spurn music, art, sport, and human government, which cuts adherents off from the rest of society, she said.

Across the English Channel, Sara Khan, founder of the antiextremist Inspire movement, has reached similar conclusions, worrying that “all extremism, even nonviolent forms, creates the mood music for terrorism.”

Muslim and non-Muslim society “has chosen to be tolerant of intolerance,” Khan argued. “We need a sea change in attitudes,” she says. “We need to be upfront and honest in the Muslim community about violent and nonviolent extremists.”

Recent years have seen a growth in local Muslim groups ready to challenge extremists, she said, “but they are still in the minority, and people involved in counter-radicalization are called government stooges.”

There is a good deal of resentment among ordinary British Muslims about the government’s antiterror strategy, known as Prevent, which legally obliges citizens to report any suspicions they may have about their neighbors.

“It turns people against each other,” Shah said, “instead of encouraging them to have braver conversations.”

At the Makkah mosque in Leeds, Asim believes “it is absolutely fair to ask people to report” their suspicions. “Nobody wants [extremists] amongst us,” he said. They “are abusing our faith. No one wants to lose a young member of the community, and each attack gives rise to anti-Islamic hatred.”

Islamophobia is a growing problem in Britain. Anti-Muslim attacks have risen nearly fourfold since 2013, and on June 18 a man drove his van into worshipers emerging from Ramadan prayers at Finsbury Park mosque, killing one of them.

“We must accept that Islamophobia is used by extremists to fan their narrative,” Shah said. “We can condemn [attacks] till we are blue in the face, but in the end it’s about . . . seeing that they are a threat to us.”

*Courtney Traub in London and Sara Miller Llana in Copenhagen contributed reporting. A version of this article, which was edited on July 14, appears in the August 2 print edition under the title "Europe's Muslims ask: Is terrorism a community problem?"*