

The Politics of Violence: Standing Firm, Staying Open

National Emergency Conference on UK Mosque Safety and Security -
Birmingham, 25 July 2026

The moment we are in

- Assalamu alaikum.
- Thank you for having me, and thank you to everyone who has travelled here today - because the fact that this room is full tells its own story.
- We are here because our communities are frightened, and I want to begin by saying plainly: that fear is not irrational, it is not exaggerated, and it is not weakness.
- In the past year we have seen a mosque in Blackburn set alight, and only weeks before that, masked men throwing incendiary devices into a prayer room in the same town.
- We have seen the home of an Islamic teacher firebombed in Bolton.
- We have seen a man walk into Manchester Central Mosque during tarawih prayers, with two thousand worshippers inside, carrying weapons - stopped only by the courage and composure of volunteers.
- We have seen arson at a mosque in Peacehaven, a small town where the Muslim community had worked for years to build a place of their own.
- And behind these headline incidents sit thousands of smaller ones: graffiti, broken windows, threats online, abuse shouted at women and children on their way to the masjid.
- The official figures confirm what you already know from experience - religiously motivated hate crime against Muslims has risen sharply, and monitoring groups have recorded their highest numbers of anti-Muslim incidents since records began.
- So no, you are not imagining it. Something has changed in this country, and we need to be honest about what it is.

Why this is happening: the politics of violence

- My talk is called the politics of violence, and I chose those words deliberately, because the single most important thing I can tell you is this: these attacks are not random.
- A firebomb thrown at a mosque is not an act of madness that falls from the sky - it is the end point of a long chain.
- That chain begins with words: with politicians and commentators who talk about Muslims as a problem to be managed, an invasion to be stopped, a culture that does not belong.
- It runs through the media and social media, where lies travel faster than corrections - remember that the riots that swept this country after Southport were fuelled by a falsehood about a Muslim attacker.
- And it ends with an individual who has heard, a thousand times, that people like you and me are the enemy - and who decides to act on it.
- This matters because it changes how we understand our situation: we are not dealing with a few isolated criminals, we are dealing with a climate.
- And it matters for a second reason: violence of this kind has a purpose. Its purpose is to intimidate. Its purpose is to make you shrink your life, hide your faith, keep your children home, think twice before going to jummah.
- This climate is not going to ease soon. That is not a cause for despair; it is a reason to prepare.
- And we prepare together — not each mosque standing alone, but as a network of communities that knows its own strength.
- We are not going to cower. We are not going to fold. We are going to organise, and we are going to be resilient in ways that are real and effective.
- Because resilience, here, is a form of resistance. It is how we refuse the future these attacks are trying to impose on us.
- Every time a mosque stays open, every time the congregation returns, every time a community refuses to disappear from public life, the violence has failed in what it set out to do — and we show, without a word, that British Muslims are here to stay.
- Hold on to that thought, because everything I say from here flows from it.

What we learned across Europe

- For the past few years I led a European research project called PROTONE, funded by the European Commission, looking at how to protect places of worship.
- We surveyed more than three thousand people across Belgium, Germany, Spain and Italy, and we sat down with dozens of faith leaders and congregations to ask a simple question: what actually makes people feel safe in their place of worship - and what doesn't?
- I want to share what we found, because although the research was mainland European, the lessons speak directly to the situation British Muslims face right now.

First insight: fear travels further than the attack itself.

- The strongest driver of feeling unsafe was not reading about terrorism in the abstract - it was direct experience of violence and damage to the building itself.
- When one mosque is attacked, worshippers at mosques a hundred miles away feel it, because an attack on a place of worship is understood, correctly, as an attack on everyone who prays there.
- That is why the events in Blackburn and Manchester are felt in Birmingham, Bradford and Bristol - fear is contagious in a way that statistics never capture.
- The practical lesson: how we respond publicly to an attack matters enormously, because the response is watched by the whole community, not just the congregation affected.
- Calm, visible, organised responses - like the one we saw from the volunteers in Manchester - do more to restore confidence than any press release.

Second insight: cameras and gates, on their own, do not make people feel safe.

- This surprised some of our partners, but it came through clearly: communities that invested only in physical security - fences, shutters, guards - did not necessarily feel safer.

- In some cases, heavy visible security made worshippers more anxious, because every camera and barrier is also a daily reminder of threat.
- And there is a deeper cost: a mosque that looks like a fortress stops feeling like a home - for the elderly, for children, for the new Muslim walking through the door for the first time, for the curious neighbour.
- Please hear me carefully: I am not saying don't invest in security. Sensible physical protection matters, and this afternoon's workshops will give you the practical detail.
- What I am saying is that security measures work best when they are discreet, proportionate, and wrapped inside something bigger - and that bigger thing is relationships.

Third insight: the safest mosques are the best-connected mosques.

- Across every country we studied, the communities who felt most secure were not the ones with the highest walls - they were the ones with the deepest roots.
- They knew their neighbours, and their neighbours knew them.
- They had a named contact at the local police station before anything happened, not after.
- They had relationships with the council, with local schools, with the churches and community groups on their street.
- When something did happen, those communities were not alone: neighbours turned up with support, the police response was faster and better informed, and local media told the story with sympathy rather than suspicion.
- Isolation, by contrast, is a vulnerability - a mosque that nobody outside the community knows is a mosque that nobody outside the community will defend.
- So here is a hard question to take home: if your masjid was attacked tomorrow, how many non-Muslim neighbours would stand with you the next morning? If the honest answer is "not many", that is a security gap - and it is one you can close without spending a penny on hardware.

Fourth insight: preparation turns fear into confidence.

- Our research found a consistent pattern: congregations that had a plan felt safer than congregations that had only anxiety.
- Not an elaborate plan - a simple one. Who locks which door. Who calls the police. Who looks after the children. Who speaks to the media. Who checks on the vulnerable.
- Fear thrives on helplessness; the feeling that something terrible might happen and there is nothing we can do.
- A plan replaces helplessness with roles, and roles give people back a sense of control - that psychological shift is itself a form of protection.
- The volunteers at Manchester Central Mosque did not stop that attacker by luck; they responded the way prepared people respond.

What we can do - starting this weekend

- Let me draw these threads into a handful of practical commitments, and I will keep this brief because the workshops this afternoon will go deeper.
- One: report everything. Every incident, however small - the graffiti, the threatening message, the abuse in the street. Unreported incidents are invisible to police, invisible to government, and invisible to the funding decisions that follow. Our data is our evidence, and our evidence is our case.
- Two: build your local relationships now, in peacetime. Invite the neighbours in. Hold the open day. Meet your local officers before you need them. Every relationship you build this year is protection you will draw on in a crisis.
- Three: make a simple emergency plan and walk your congregation through it - your welcome team is also your safety team, and the people who greet worshippers at the door are your first and best line of awareness.
- Four: look after each other's minds, not just the building. Fear does quiet damage - to children who overhear anxious conversations, to elders who stop attending, to women who change how they dress or travel. Resilience means noticing this and talking about it openly, in khutbahs and in classrooms, without shame.

- Five: stand with each other. When a mosque anywhere in Britain is attacked, the strongest message we can send is that its congregation is not alone - a phone call, a visit, a delegation at Friday prayers. Networks like the ones in this room today are precisely how that happens.

Staying open is the victory

- I want to end where I began, with the politics of violence.
- Those who attack our mosques want a specific future: one where Muslims live smaller, quieter, more frightened lives; where our institutions retreat behind steel and our children learn that their faith is a danger to them.
- Our task is to refuse that future - intelligently, calmly, and together.
- That means taking security seriously without letting it define us.
- It means protecting our buildings while keeping their doors open - because a mosque's openness is not a weakness to be managed, it is the very thing we are protecting.
- Previous generations of British Muslims built these institutions from nothing - from terraced houses and converted warehouses - in the face of hostility that was, in its own way, just as fierce.
- They did not build them so that we would abandon them at the first fire, and they did not build them as fortresses.
- They built them as homes - for prayer, for learning, for weddings and funerals and the whole of life.
- Our job, in this harder season, is to keep them exactly that: safe enough to protect our people, and open enough to remain who we are.
- The evidence from across Europe says this is possible. The people in this room are the proof that we are serious about it.
- Thank you - and I look forward to the discussion.