

Interview. From our correspondents Janny Groen and Annieke Kranenberg

London - "I am still in shock. I am still trying to find out what happened and who is behind it. But one thing is certain: the failed attacks last weekend will not do the reputation of the Moslem community in England any good."

That is why the British media consultant Wasim Mahmud is working flat out on his project Yeh Hum Naheen, which is the Urdu for "That's not what we are about!" "Finally the jihad by the moderates against terrorism has begun", he says. In February Mahmud launched the Yeh Hum Naheen video clip in Pakistan. Eight of the ten most popular Pakistani pop artists perform in the video. On 16 July the single is coming out in Great Britain, home to a considerable Pakistani community.

Giving a voice

"We want to use the clip to give a voice to all the young Moslems who reject terrorism. Those who are sick of the image of terrorism which is linked to their religion and those who want to distance themselves from the Jihadists", says Mahmud in a busy London coffee shop.

The single is a great success in Pakistan. Mahmud "It was number one within a few weeks. It has been downloaded between 60 and 70 thousand times. That is a lot for a poor country like Pakistan where only a few people have Internet access. Children are singing the Yeh Hum Naheen refrain in the streets. The Pakistani cricket team comforted itself with the words of "That's not what we are about!" after their humiliating defeat by Ireland during the World Cup at the end of March. What began as pop music has now become a folk song and is growing into a movement."

Protest songs

Mahmud hopes that the number becomes as well known as the famous protest songs from the 1960s and 1970s. Songs such as 'We shall not be moved', which was sung during protests in the US against racism and John Lennon's 'Give Peace a Chance' which was cherished by young people protesting against the Vietnam war. Mahmud, who was born in the Punjab and emigrated to England with his parents at the age of two, has undertaken this initiative because of his two sons. Khurram (20) and Khaiyyam (18) both studied at the British Film Academy and wrestled with "the twisted image being formed ((of Islam))". They were trapped between the views of many white British citizens, who regard every Pakistani as a potential terrorist, and those of intolerant British Moslems.

"They were born and raised in Birmingham, explains Mahmud. We taught them not to distinguish between different colours and to respect all religions. In the street Moslem children called them racists just because they were hanging around with white children. They ate pasta, so they weren't good Moslems. ((People were)) so irritatingly short-sighted, ((there was)) so little tolerance."

Following a stay in Amman where Mahmud was temporarily working as a media consultant, the children got a more positive picture of Islamic society. Mahmud says "They saw that Christians and Moslems could get along in a relaxed way."

The sons asked their father to think about a strong message which could reach young Moslems in the world. Mahmud says, "They said 'Dad, you have to do something, you have to let the world know that most young Moslems have nothing to do with terrorism. Start with the Moslems of Pakistani origin." The sons believed that weighty manifestos would not reach young people, but cricket and music would.

Network

Father Mahmud has an extensive network in the media world. He conceived the music programme "Pepsi Top of the Pops" for Pakistani television, and has much experience in setting up independent media in conflict areas. He worked in Kosovo, Baghdad, Lebanon and Afghanistan. He has also worked for the Dutch Free Voice, which uses money from the Postcode Lottery to set up children's programmes like the Youth News. In 2004 he was involved in setting up the Afghan youth news programme 'Ayenda Sazan', which means 'those who shape the future'. He also set up the country's first free radio station and he wrote a book about the experience called 'Good Morning Afghanistan'.

Mahmud approached the ten most popular Pakistani pop stars, including Ali Zafar, Strings, Haroon Rashid, Au Haider, composer Shuja Haider and songwriter Ali Moeen. "Two singers did not wish to participate. They did not want to be associated with a political message. The other eight said they would be involved straight away", says Mahmud. Between November 2006 and January 2007 the song was recorded in the Sound of Speed studio in Karachi. The video clip was filmed by Mahmud's sons.

Funding

Up until now Mahmud has funded the project out of his own pocket. He is making a loss but has since set up a fund. He has approached NGOs, certain Islamic business leaders and banks. He refuses funding from governments, particularly the US government. "The United States donates 1.6 billion dollars per year to win over the hearts and minds of Moslems. They buy Pakistani TV channels, and broadcast the multi-media international programme 'Voice of America'. But the American message is mistrusted. I prefer public diplomacy."

Local Asian TV channels in England are already showing the video clip. The official launch will take place on 16 July. Almost all Asian radio and television broadcasters will play the song and show the video. There are around 250 of them. The Islamic Channel will not be participating. It is orthodox and regards music as haram (bad).

If the fund attracts sufficient money, Mahmud wants to release an Arabic language version of Yeh Hum Naheen and work on numerous new ideas. For example, organising a Band Aid style concert, with performances by Islamic and Western artists.

Mahmud says "Initially I thought that Yeh Hum Naheen would be a small scale project, but now I am getting such an overwhelming reaction. Young Pakistani people are sending e-mails saying 'this is what we have been waiting for, carry on'. And I will carry on with my fight against terrorism. It is the greatest challenge facing our generation."