

Chapter 12

Home-grown nihilism – the clash within civilisations

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Terrorism reflects a wide spectrum of causes and beliefs. Individuals who trained in camps in Afghanistan have different motivations from those who act out of a sense of vengeance in the Gaza strip. Some groups may hold global pretensions, but most have a more limited, regional focus.

What concerns us here, however, is what it is that propels young men from Birmingham, Burnley, Leeds or Luton – individuals with no tangible connection to Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq, Bosnia, Chechnya or anywhere else much beyond these shores – to choose to be, or to support, terrorists.

Our ability to understand this objectively is crucial; otherwise we may impute meanings and motivations to those involved solely on the basis of their own statements, or of our prejudices. We would then fail to grasp any broader dynamic involved and may end up making matters worse.

The search for meaning

On 11 May 2006 the British government published the *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005*.⁶⁶ This document examined what was known of the terrible events that had occurred the previous summer and that led to the loss of 52 innocent lives, in addition to those of the four perpetrators.

The preface to the report describes it as a "narrative", and that is an apt and telling description for what follows. The document presents a step-by-step account of *what* happened, *where* and *when* it happened, by *whom* it was carried out and even *how*, but – despite investigations lasting almost a year and a section devoted to the issue – little explanation as to *why*.

Yet it is precisely the *why* that should be of most interest. Without understanding *why*, there is little hope of precluding such incidents from happening again in the future. In addition, not being clear as to *why* allows all manner of self-appointed experts, pundits and commentators – according to their pre-existing political persuasions – to project their own pet theory on to the situation with a view to shaping ensuing policy.

66 HC 1087 (Norwich: HMSO, 2006)

Most common among these purported explanations has been the presumption that the attacks formed some kind of retribution for the British government having supported the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁶⁷ But oddly, the assumed ring-leader, Mohammad Sidique Khan, made no specific mention of Iraq in his so-called martyrdom video released soon after the bombings.

Others suggest the bombers to have been part of a resurgent and radical global Islamist movement or extremist conspiracy. Accordingly, the presumed influences of madrasas, mosques and mullahs have come under extensive scrutiny. Alternative explanations and justifications have been sought in the supposed social and economic backgrounds of the conspirators,⁶⁸ as well as their psychological profiles and educational performances.

Much has been made of the fact that two of the four had travelled to Pakistan, but the report indicates that who they may have met there "has not yet been established". There may be some evidence that these two learned their techniques there from an individual who also taught one of the failed bombers of 21 July 2005. But it is also clear that they only sought this support and endorsement after deciding to act and that neither group knew of the other.

In fact, the *Official Account* describes the backgrounds of the perpetrators of the London bombings as "unexceptional", their purported links to al-Qaeda as lacking "firm evidence", and their methods and materials as, respectively, requiring "no great expertise" and being "readily available".

Bombers did not represent a wider community

We should not take the assertions of the bombers to have acted on behalf of other Muslims at face value. They had not sought the views of other Muslims and did not represent these in any way. A parallel Report into the *London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, issued by the Intelligence & Security Committee, also notes that the claimed responsibility for the attacks by Ayman al Zawaheri was "not supported by any firm evidence".⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Such a view has become mainstream across the political spectrum, migrating from George Galloway's tirade against Tony Blair upon being elected MP for the Respect Party in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in 2005 to the authors of "Riding Pillion for Tackling Terrorism is a High-risk Policy", a paper in the Chatham House publication *Security, Terrorism & the UK*, ISP/NSC briefing paper 05/01(London: RIIA, 2005)

⁶⁸ Briggs, R, Fieschi, C and Lownsbrough, H *Bringing it Home: Community-based Approaches to Counter-terrorism* (London: Demos, 2006)

⁶⁹ Cm 6785 (Norwich: HMSO, 2006)

By interpreting the available information according to their own preferred and uncritical models, many analysts have, in effect, been doing the terrorists' thinking and talking for them. They have helped to fill the vacuum of information and confusion otherwise left behind. These purported explanations may, in their turn, encourage and even serve as justifications to others intent on action. But are they right?

We will never know exactly what motivated the London bombers. Those truly responsible are no longer around to inform us. Yet many of the purported explanations seem to seek to excuse them of this responsibility. The publication of a rather limited "narrative", rather than of an in-depth political analysis, shows how difficult it has been for the authorities to establish the motives and drivers of those concerned. It suggests that much of the superficial speculation is not supported by any hard evidence.

There is little to indicate that Khan or his collaborators Shehzad Tanweer, Jermaine Lindsay and Hasib Hussain were particularly pious or held any deep appreciation of the Koran; still less that they had direct relations to anyone in Palestine, Bosnia or Iraq. They did not bother to ask their families, friends or neighbours what they thought about such matters. That is why these were so deeply shocked by their actions.

The bombers met in the local gymnasium rather than the local mosque, they went on outdoor activities together and, the day before the attacks, one of them played that quintessentially English game – cricket – in his local park. In the end, they acted alone – in isolation – a form of private gesture against a world they appeared to feel little connection with, let alone ability to influence. They took part in the ultimate "not in my name" protest – a trend and slogan manifested by many other interest groups nowadays.⁷⁰

In other words, contrary to the popular image of an organised, global network of religiously inspired fanatics, determined to create mass destruction, the actual evidence points to a small group, operating in isolation, using rudimentary tools and looking to rationalise their rage through religion.

Pointless and meaningless acts

The real truth, then, about the London bombings may be that they were largely pointless and meaningless. This would suggest a problem entirely opposed to that presented by

⁷⁰ "Not in my name" was the slogan used by many of those opposed to the Iraq war of 2003. Faisal Devji points to a growing usage of such non-political statements by a wide variety of groups encompassing environmental protesters and others in *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2005)

politicians and officials, media and other commentators alike. The bombers were fantasists – wannabe terrorists – searching for an identity and a meaning to their lives. They hoped to find it in a global cause that was not their own, but that appeared to give expression to their nihilistic sense of grievance. Islam was their motif, not their motive.

This interpretation may offer little solace to the relatives of those affected. Their demands, as well as those of others, for a public inquiry into the matter appear more like a desperate attempt to find a more substantial explanation or to attribute blame where, for now at least, none can be found.⁷¹

That is hardly surprising, as the desire to understand the causes of, or to attach some kind of meaning to, adversity is a strong one. It can be deflating or confusing to discover that some event did not have the profundity originally attached to it, or that it was largely pointless. Nevertheless, we could all learn from the mother of Theo van Gogh, the Dutch filmmaker murdered by a similar, self-styled radical Islamist, who indicated in relation to her plight: "What is so regrettable ... is that Theo has been murdered by such a loser, such an incoherent person. Murder or manslaughter is always a terrible thing but to be killed by such a figure makes it especially hard."⁷²

Recognising the random and unpredictable character of her loss ensures it is not endowed with portentous meaning. It does not lead to a demand to reorganise society around the presumption of similar events occurring again. To do so would be to normalise extremes and thereby to marginalise what is normal. This would effectively "do the terrorists' job for them",⁷³ by institutionalising instability.

The usual rejoinder to this is to argue that terrorists "only need to be lucky once",⁷⁴ while governments and their security agencies must counter them at all times if they are not to lose the public's support. But the evidence from 7 July 2005 rather suggests this perception not to be true. Most people sought to go to work the following day rather than blame the authorities.

An absence of meaning is not just disorienting, it can be debilitating. In his book *Man's*

71 This is not to belittle the genuine grief of all those concerned, or indeed their understandable desire for support.

72 Cited in *De Telegraaf*, 26 July 2005. Available at: http://www.telegraaf.nl/binnenland/23285701/Moeder_Van_Gogh:_enige_juiste_straf.html

73 A common warning from the Prime Minister, the head of the security service and many others

74 A phrase attributed to the IRA after failing to assassinate the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher

Search for Meaning, the Holocaust survivor and philosopher Viktor Frankl wrote: "Man is not destroyed by suffering; he is destroyed by suffering without meaning."⁷⁵ It is our failure to place things into an agreed framework that can readily make random events assume catastrophic proportions, thereby inducing a sense of fear and terror. In a similar vein, French political scientist Zaki Laïdi has suggested that the dissolution of the old – Cold War – world order was what in particular helped to create what he has termed "a world without meaning"⁷⁶ Accordingly, there is now a growing search for meaning and identity in society.

Within an assumed framework of meaning, or in pursuit of agreed goals, adverse events are understood and can be withstood – as was the case during the IRA's terror campaign on mainland Britain. Today, in an age when nothing is, or appears, so obvious any more, such incidents accentuate our uncertainties.

The causes of radicalisation

To some, what is happening was supposedly predicted. The idea of a "clash of civilisations", taken from the title of Samuel Huntington's book,⁷⁷ assumed that future conflicts would increasingly pit East against West in a fundamental conflict over values. This thesis benefited from renewed interest in the aftermath of the attacks upon America in September 2001. But few have inquired critically into the true ideological origins of those perpetrating acts of terrorism in the name of Islam.

Others have been more circumspect in their pronouncements, but in essence the core assumption remains. In a speech on security to the Foreign Policy Centre in London early in 2006,⁷⁸ British Prime Minister Tony Blair argued in reference to the on-going war on terror:

This is not a clash between civilisations. It is a clash about civilisation. It is the age-old battle between progress and reaction, between those who embrace and see opportunity in the modern world and those who reject its existence; between optimism and hope on the one hand, and pessimism and fear on the other.

75 Frankl, VE *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959)

76 Laïdi, Z *A World Without Meaning* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998)

77 Huntington, SP *The Clash of Civilizations & the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996)

78 Speech at the Foreign Policy Centre, London, 21 March 2006. Available at: <http://fpc.org.uk/events/past/231>

But the ideas and protagonists Tony Blair apparently had in mind in his "clash about civilisation" are all foreign in their origins, or, at least, externally oriented and focused. He continued: "The roots of global terrorism and extremism are indeed deep. They reach right down through decades of alienation, victimhood and political oppression in the Arab and Muslim world."

In a similar vein, the recently released British government document *Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom's Strategy*⁷⁹ identifies the need for a "battle of ideas, challenging the ideological motivations that extremists believe justify the use of violence". This key strand of the strategy is described in terms indicating its having been solely conceptualised as affecting, or targeting, Muslims or Muslim communities.

So while most politicians and officials have slowly reconciled themselves to the fact that many of the perpetrators of contemporary acts of terror are Western-born or educated, the assumption remains that what drives them is a foreign ideology or agenda that only Muslims can understand or address – a point reasserted by the Prime Minister in subsequent comments to the House of Commons liaison committee,⁸⁰ and by the Home Secretary, Dr John Reid.⁸¹

But is the problem really a "clash about civilisation", or even, as the Home Secretary proposed, that we are having to manage the consequences of some kind of conflict within Islam? In some ways it seems we rather face a more profound cultural crisis domestically. To recognise the problem as such would be discomfiting for Western leaders and societies. It would require understanding the extent to which many of the ideas that inspire the nihilist terrorism we witness today are often home grown and inculcated.

Common explanation is poorly grounded

While conceding that many of the perpetrators and conspirators are increasingly turning out to have been Western in their origins, most, including Tony Blair, still presume their guiding influences to have been reactionary ideas and ideologies from the East. Hence, a lazy empirical approach has been employed to identify so-called "risk factors" that may

79 Cm 6888 (2006) (Norwich: HMSO)

80 Uncorrected transcript of oral evidence to the House of Commons liaison committee, 4 July 2006. Available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmliaisn/uc709-iii/uc70902.htm>

81 Speech to Muslim groups in east London, 20 September 2006. Available at: <http://press.homeoffice.gov.uk/Speeches/sp-muslim-group-20-09-06>

lead individuals to become "radicalised".⁸² But this approach assumes a conclusion and then goes in search of the evidence to corroborate it. It is profoundly unscientific. Above all, it ignores the dominant social context within which most such individuals find themselves – that is, advanced Western societies.

Unsurprisingly, many researchers find their prejudices confirmed by using this method – that is what is wrong with it. Accordingly, an impoverished background, or having listened to the inflammatory rhetoric of an obscure cleric, are factors that appear to be confirmed in the minds of these researchers as "radicalising" influences. All agree that a deep sense of injustice as regards affairs in the Middle East is also key.⁸³

But one could equally propose that being a billionaire, driving a white Mercedes or running the family business are significant risk factors. Certainly all three have featured in Osama bin Laden's life. Starting with an answer and then joining up the dots is child's play. It offers no insight beyond assumed conclusions.

The trial in London of the so-called "Crawley Group", accused of plotting further terrorist atrocities after acquiring a large quantity of ammonium nitrate fertiliser, is quite apposite in this regard. Their list of alleged intended targets included shoppers, drinkers, football supporters and "slags" in nightclubs.⁸⁴ The notion that these are major problems requiring to be regulated appears to reflect the ideas of certain policy makers and their exaggerated fears of social disorder in some sectors of society, rather more than verses from the Koran. So, could paying too much attention to contemporary commentators be a radicalising factor too?

As the academic Marc Sageman has pointed out in the most authoritative study of people associated with al-Qaeda,⁸⁵ there are no clear radicalising influences or predisposing risk factors that can be identified. If anything, these individuals are likely to have a middle- or upper-class, secular background and to be reasonably well educated. That would put many of the critics and commentators at risk of becoming radicalised too.

82 There is a burgeoning literature on the causes of so-called radicalisation, emerging from a wide variety of organisations, very little of which is peer-reviewed.

83 *Towards a Community-based Approach to Counter-terrorism*, WPSO6/5 (2006). Available at: <http://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/documents/conferences/WPSO6-5/pdfs/WPSO6-5.pdf>

84 "Gang 'Planned to Bomb London Nightclub'" in *The Guardian*, 25 May 2006

85 Sageman, M *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004)

In particular, though, the individuals concerned were rarely recruited from above but rather seem actively to have sought out terrorist networks or sects that they might join. Some only converted to Islam after this. This would seem to confirm their desire to be part of something, but more importantly it raises the issue as to why they were unable to find that something closer to home.

What in the West is radicalising individuals?

The key is not what it is that attracts a minority from a variety of backgrounds, including some who are relatively privileged, to fringe Islamist organisations, but rather what it is about our own societies and culture that fails to provide aspirational, educated and energetic young individuals with a clear sense of purpose and collective direction through which to lead their lives and realise their ambitions, so that they are left looking for this elsewhere – including, for some, among various arcane and distorted belief systems.

In some ways the nihilist criminals that detonated their rudimentary devices in London in the summer of 2005 appear to reflect the sentiments of other disgruntled individuals and groups across the developed world today. Their acts seem more akin to the Columbine high-school massacre and other such incidents, where usually respectable young men, born and educated in the West, decide for various reasons – or none that we can work out – to kill themselves and scores of civilians.

Their ideas and influences appear to have far less to do with imams and mullahs, and far more in common with the dystopian views of numerous commentators who criticise Western society today. Indeed, a recently published compilation of Osama bin Laden's writings reveals how frequently he is inclined to cite Western writers, Western diplomats and Western thinkers.⁸⁶ At one point he even advises the White House to read Robert Fisk, rather than, as one might have supposed, the Koran.

It would be remiss to ignore the growing influence of a significant degree of what some have identified as a culture of self-loathing in the developed world. If one wants to discover anti-American views coherently expressed, or people who reject the benefits of science, progress and modernity, then one need not look far to find them. Such opinions are all around us.

86 Bin Laden, O, Lawrence, B (ed) and Howarth, J (trans) *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005)

Indeed, less than two days had passed after 9/11 when Seumas Milne first used the term anti-American in a Guardian newspaper article, entitled "They Can't See Why They Are Hated".⁸⁷ On the same day, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, pastor of the 22,000-member Thomas Road Baptist Church of Lynchburg, Virginia, told US television viewers that God had given America "what we deserve".⁸⁸ Aside from such extremes, many others point to continued American intransigence over issues such as global warming and human rights as purported explanations for what happened.

Cultural self-loathing is widespread

It may be unpalatable or unpleasant to recall or recognise that a significant number of people, not all of whom were Muslim, were not that saddened to see the Twin Towers in New York going down. A sense that America had it coming was quite widespread in some supposedly respectable quarters, where a barely concealed Schadenfreude was in evidence. Many – including those in positions of authority or charged with defeating terrorism – are inclined to caricature contemporary culture as decadent and degenerate, or corrupt and selfish.

But this reflects a broader view of human action in the world. Increasingly, Western intellectuals have come to portray this as being largely negative.⁸⁹ Now mainstream milieus depict ambition as arrogant, development as dangerous and success as selfish. Within certain circles in America, too, power has become presented as egotism, freedom as illusory and the desire to defend oneself as the act of a bully.

Western society today is replete with individuals and institutions that appear determined to criticise and undermine human achievements. Even environmental agendas have been turned into sorry moral tales of human hubris, rather than an identification and celebration of the need for greater ingenuity.

Reflecting these trends, the President of the Royal Society called one of his latest books *Our Final Century: Will the Human Race Survive the Twenty-First Century?*,⁹⁰ while the Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics & Political Science is comfortable describing human beings as being little more than a plague upon the planet

87 Milne, S "They Can't See Why They Are Hated" in *The Guardian*, 13 September 2001

88 Cited in "God Gave US 'What We Deserve', Falwell Says" in *Washington Post*, 14 September 2001

89 Bookchin, M *Re-enchanting Humanity: A Defense of the Human Spirit against Anti-Humanism, Misanthropy, Mysticism & Primitivism* (London: Cassell, 1995)

90 Rees, M (London: William Heinemann, 2003)

in his book *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans & Other Animals*.⁹¹ A recent edition of the prestigious UK science journal *New Scientist* speculated positively as to what the earth would be like without humans (and presumably without *New Scientist*) being there.⁹²

Nor are such ideas limited to those of a few academics. Surely, when Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men* became the best-selling book on both sides of the Atlantic – selling over 300,000 copies in the UK in its first year of publication alone – a few bright minds in the security world and beyond should have noticed the growing depth of cynicism and disillusionment in society and their potentially adverse consequences?⁹³

It is this cultural malaise and pessimistic outlook that forms the backdrop, and inevitably shapes, contemporary terrorism. Increasingly, it appears that this is sustained by two elements – the radical nihilists who are prepared to lose their lives and those of others around them in their misguided determination to leave their mark upon a world that they reject, and the nihilist intellectuals who help frame a public discourse and culture of apocalyptic failure and rejection.

Conclusion

Instead of imagining the root causes of terrorism in the UK as emanating from overseas, or reflecting some foreign ideology, it is time for us to recognise their domestic dimension. This is not, as some suppose, driven by social deprivation or exclusion, nor is it the consequence of a few influential individuals.

Rather it appears to reflect a broader sense of alienation and confusion that has gripped the modern world. Many today are in search of an identity and a meaning to their lives as the old networks and affiliations that used to provide these in the last century – national, religious and secular – have been eroded.

The uncertainty of our times has led many to view human action with concern, encouraging a destructive misanthropy that has been acted upon by some who view themselves as particular victims. It is this dominant dystopian culture, which is our own, that needs to be addressed if we are to defeat terrorism.

91 Gray, J (London: Granta, 2003)

92 "Earth Without People: What If We All Disappeared Tomorrow?" (14 October 2006)

93 Moore, M *Stupid White Men... & Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation!* (London: Penguin, 2002)

