

# Global terrorism

## WHAT SHOULD WE REALLY FEAR?

BILL DURODIÉ,  
Defence Academy of  
the United Kingdom



**L**AST YEAR, SENIOR SECURITY OFFICIALS, announced that a number of terrorist plots had been uncovered since the July 2005 attacks in London.

They suggested the possibility of dozens more conspiracies in progress, organised by lots of individuals and small groups. Thousands are under surveillance and hundreds of thousands are believed to provide tacit support for terrorism. So how worried should we be?

First, it is worth having a sense of proportion. More people die on Britain's roads every week than were killed in the London bombings two summers ago. Even if the attacks had been on the scale of those in Madrid, Bali or even New York, while undoubtedly a tragedy for all concerned, such incidents would not be able to destroy,

### An exaggerated sense of threat has encouraged us to accept increasingly draconian measures introduced against our personal liberties

or even seriously damage, our societies as we know them – unless we allow them to.

Second, we need to understand the nature of the threat. Many presume that terrorism is intimately linked to a particular interpretation of Islam and that we should encourage Muslims to oppose this view. But there is little evidence that such analysis applies to recent incidents. Instead, what we find are angry young men who look to Islam for justification after deciding to perpetrate their acts. In that sense, Islam has been their motif rather than their motive. There is no sign that the individuals concerned were particularly pious, or that they were well-versed in, connected to, or vociferous about the politics of the Middle East, or anywhere else beyond these shores. Rather, they were born here, well-educated and, as the official report into the London bombings makes clear, unexceptional. Their methods and materials required little expertise and were readily available. So why would they destroy themselves and those around them?

Rather than reading some portentous meaning into their actions, it may be healthier for us to see them, much as we see those of other lone killers, as being largely pointless. Far from having anything to do with Iraq, Israel or Islam, these bombers were largely fantasists – 'wannabe' terrorists – searching for an identity and a meaning to their lives. And they found them in causes that were not their own but that appeared to give expression to their nihilistic sense of alienation and grievance.

This explanation is both reassuring and highly problematic. It is reassuring that, unlike the presumption made by many security professionals, we are not facing the organised network of global terror that they imagine. Accordingly, the methods and problems we are likely to encounter will be far more rudimentary than is commonly

assumed. The individuals concerned may talk about acquiring chemical, biological or radiological weapons, but that is what it will remain – idle chatter.

The danger then is largely our own. If we presume to be dealing with a level of threat that we are not, then there will be more incidents like that in East London last year, when armed police were sent to arrest two brothers on the suspicion that they were terrorists. The problem then was not so much the information that the police received, but rather how they interpreted that information through their presumption of a worst-case scenario.

On the other hand, while the acute nature of the problem may not be as bad as has been supposed, what is more problematic is that the scale of support for it may be far wider than even now many seem to imagine. While we have to learn to deal with the nihilistic actions of the few prepared to take such measures, we also have to ask difficult questions about our own society and the seeming extent of support, or sympathy within it, for mindless and destructive criminal acts.

There is a widespread assumption, including among those charged with defeating terrorism, that society today is corrupt and degenerate. Many view our supposedly consumerist culture as selfish and decadent. Increasingly, over recent years, from the top of society down, an image has developed of humanity as little more than a plague on the planet, destroying habitats and destroying each other. Small wonder that Osama bin Laden is so fond of citing western thinkers.

When, last summer, there were numerous disruptions at British airports, after the exposure of a series of alleged plots to blow up airliners with liquid explosives, some expressed surprise that one of those arrested was the son of a Conservative party agent. But there should be no surprise that ideas which, on occasion, have helped to caricature our society as being full of obese hooligans, binge drinkers and slags in nightclubs, should inspire others to take action.

Terrorism is unlikely ever to destroy society – but fear can. An exaggerated sense of threat has encouraged us to accept increasingly draconian measures introduced against our liberties by those charged with protecting us. It has allowed politicians and officials to justify all manner of restrictions on our lives with little debate. In that regard, these have bypassed the need to engage the public in a way akin to the few terrorists who have given up on the possibility of change through political debate.

The immediate problem posed by terrorists remains extremely small. But there remains the far larger problem of defining who we are, what values we uphold and where we intend to go in the 21st century. Without such clarity as to our aims and purpose as a society, there is little hope of defeating terrorism and, more importantly, the misanthropic culture that informs it. That dystopian culture did not emerge in the Middle East but in our own societies. And it is here that we shall have to defeat it. ■