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The London Bombings: Radicalisation and its implications

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THE investigative work continues in London under the disconcerting possibility that the coordinated bombings of July 7 were the work of British citizens. Police in London reportedly have revealed that all four suspects were British nationals of Pakistani descent, making them the first suicide bombers to strike in Europe. The methods used in the attacks, and the disclosure that the perpetrators were from within the British Muslim community, caused more surprise and shock than if the perpetrators would have entered the United Kingdom solely for this purpose - as did the 9/11 hijackers in the case of the United States.

This raises two pertinent issues: Firstly, did the liberal environment in the UK permit the movement and autonomy of suspected militants? Secondly, what is the implication if the perpetrators were homegrown? Does this suggest a degree of unchecked radicalism which has spiralled out of control?

The “Covenant of Security”?

Militants have long sought refuge, safety and operational bases across Europe. This perhaps best underscores the dilemma that most democracies face; they are forced, by virtue of their central values, to address terrorism with “one hand tied behind their back”. Democratic values, freedom of speech and the fair trial processes of the West have been well exploited by those who seek to undermine such values. This is the predicament that has led London to achieve the sobering label of “Londonistan”.

The collection of groups currently present in the UK range from the apparently non-violent, to active and vocal supporters of regional conflicts and insurgencies abroad. One such organisation is Al-Muhajiroun, a militant group which enthusiastically applauded the 9/11 attacks and described those involved as heroes of the Islamic cause. The group has openly expressed a desire to transform Britain, through violent means should this be deemed necessary, into an Islamic state.

The customary view however has long been that the state which acts as a host would not be physically targeted. The rationale was that to destabilise their place of refuge would ultimately radicalise the government into harsher legal provisions, which would then deny them that refuge. This had been endorsed by the highest levels of leadership within such organisations. As the al-Muhajiroun says in its website, <http://www.muhaajiroun.com/>: “When a Muslim enters a non-Muslim country with a covenant of security, he/she has agreed not to violate the sanctity of the other party (i.e. the government or ruler), and that they will not

violate yours. The government however represents all of the other people and so the covenant is applicable to all the people, and so you cannot kill or steal from anybody in that country, while you are under covenant."

What then, defines this "covenant of security" and did it seek to provide a set of rules of engagement for militant groups using the UK as a base? If a covenant may be described as a set of regulations by which to live, Al-Muhajiroun has expressed these in specific guidelines for those living in the UK. In this instance the expression of a covenant between the two parties then prohibits those citizens from engaging in acts of violence against their host state.

Articles published in the UK have drawn from this notion to suggest that though the violent ideology of such groups was deplorable, this unwritten contractual agreement, in a sense, actually benefited British citizens. For many, it provided a blanket of security, since it was believed that such extremists would not "bite the hand that feeds them".

Collapse of the Covenant?

The validity of this false safety has been severely undermined by the tragedy in the British capital. This provokes a sense that the covenant, sturdy as it may have seemed, has collapsed. The rationale behind this apparent degeneration into violence of course embraces all of the current arguments for the resurgence of violent terrorist acts. Did the invasion of Iraq somehow tilt the balance away from 'tolerance' to a desire on the part of the militants to bring acts of aggression into all safe havens? Did the new precedent of arrests and extradition procedures transform the British safe haven into a now hostile threat to the wider militant vision?

Indeed this was the analysis of Mohammed Bakri, leader of Al-Muhajiroun. He suggested that the former sanctity of the British state had withered away with the emergence of new more audacious provisions on anti-terrorism and an unwavering support for the American-led campaign in Iraq. Sheikh abu Hamza al-Masri, an infamous preacher of hostility towards Western governments, has now been denied the ability to do so through extradition proceedings with the United States. Currently under discussion is the possibility of introducing legislation which will criminalise incitement to religious hatred. This will prohibit inflammatory preaching by clerics who would otherwise have been able to do so within their rights under liberal free speech statutes. To this end, the position of Muslims, in Bakri's view, has degraded severely enough that the possibility of attacks could no longer be discounted.

The implications of "local bombers"

A leaked joint Home Office and Foreign Office dossier — "Young Muslims and Extremism" -- has drawn from British intelligence sources to suggest a disconcerting trend towards localised recruitment into the ideological umbrella of Al-Qaeda. The implications of such radicalisation are unpleasant. No pragmatic assessment would suggest that there is not, and has not been a collective sense of injustice and disenfranchisement from the wider Muslim community in the UK. The Iraq war was widely condemned. It was also made a platform from which challengers to the Tony Blair leadership sought to profit in the elections. Underpinning and unifying this disillusioned Muslim diaspora is the sense of a communal identity, shaping the collective ideals. This would be less hazardous if it was matched by a vision of integration. But increasingly the European model seems to be one of rejection of

local assimilation and a retreat into dangerous radicalism. Compounded by poverty, lack of access to education and the perceived injustices against fellow Muslims abroad have all contributed to the radical scenario.

The July 7 bombings would not be the first instance of British-born Muslims being engaged in acts of terrorism. Asif Hanif and Omar Khan Sharif, both British of Pakistani origins, perpetrated the Mike's Place bombing in April 2003 in Tel Aviv. Nevertheless, the inference of such an act being carried out locally by those raised in the community of London suggests something stark.

Beyond the individuals responsible, a sustaining network would have supported the preparations and the ultimate delivery of the attacks. If so, all this perhaps suggests the degree of resentment and radicalisation which has grown from defiant and vocal dissent. That dissent may now have even reached a pitch in the UK that the days of London as a base, but not operational target, may have been irrevocably altered.

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