Terrorism in Europe: The Local Aspects of a Global Threat

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There is no doubt that Al Qaeda-inspired *jihadist* terrorism has capitalised on globalisation in many ways. Using multimedia communications, the "single narrative" linking together perceived wrongs against Muslims across the world can be downloaded and sampled immediately, anywhere in the world. By portraying his message across the internet or 24/7 newsreels on satellite television, Usama Bin Laden and his cohorts have acted as an exciting inspiration for a generation of alienated Muslims youths in backrooms across the globe. In this way, the person that Australian counter-terrorist analyst David Kilcullen claimed would otherwise be a "crank in a cave" has managed to transform himself into something of a global icon[1].

There is evidence that internet and multimedia-based radicalisation has been an important factor in a number of recent terrorist cases, such as that of the 2005 London bombers[2], or aspirant shoe-bomber Sajid Badat, who seems to have radicalised himself almost entirely in isolation from others[3]. It is ironic that the internet is, in many ways, perfectly suited to *Salafism*, in that – like globalisation – it is egalitarian, and respects no national boundaries, established organisations or traditional hierarchies of elders and *ulema*[4].

At the same time, Al Qaeda has constructed an incredibly resilient and self-repairing global network of terrorism. Its dispersed cellular structure and method of franchising the corporate message to local groups, can easily straddle national boundaries, and defies traditional military responses. Al Qaeda's terrorism is a truly transnational phenomenon.

From a policy point of view, there has been much debate about whether military force in far-off places such as Afghanistan or Iraq can appropriately confront the new type of threat facing the world. Clearly it can never be the only response, and many would argue that it is in fact counter-productive in that it worsens and encourages the terrorist threat[5]. Certainly from a communications and media point of view, the additions of Iraq and Afghanistan to the list of military conflicts between Muslims and the West (supplementing Bosnia and Chechnya for example) provides further grist to the mill of a concept of a globalised conflagration. Specific incidents emerging from the fog of war such as evidence of detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib prison, or military heavy-handedness in Haditha in Iraq, simply add fuel to the *Salafist* fire.

However, an organisation of some sort called Al Qaeda does exist. Most likely in the mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan there exists a leadership of the organisation, which has the express aim of globalising its *jihad* against Western civilisation. There are real and specific individuals engaged in this global terrorist agenda, albeit some of them with tangential and shady connections to the core leadership, against whom a military and intelligence war must continue to be fought. The objectives may be tempered at the moment – it is difficult to see, for example, how the cellular and amorphous Al Qaeda structure can be extinguished completely in the near future – but there is merit in disrupting its operations to such en extent

that it must spend a greater proportion of its time on security and survival than on planning and financing new operations. This, clearly, has to be a continuing part of the policy response to the terrorist threat.

So is this solely a global phenomenon? I would argue not. There are also a number of critically important local and regional issues in Muslim communities which bring the *Salafist* message to the streets and subways of Europe, and underpin the terrorist threat. In fact, **I would argue that addressing local issues more effectively will not only defuse and dismantle the single narrative, but ultimately promises to negate the threat altogether**. This process can be described as tackling the potential "roots of terrorism".

At the most localised level, there are clearly specific factors at play which mean that terrorism breaks out in some areas but not in others. The Muslim community is far from monolithic across Europe, and encompasses a wide range of ethnic, linguistic and sectarian groups, from Turks to Bangladeshis to Somalis. The historical foundations of some of these relate to Europe's colonial past; in other cases to specific immigration or economic policies in individual countries. The bloody war of Independence in Algeria, for example, which brought a large number of original migrants to France, is very different from the factors bringing Moroccans to Germany or Pakistanis to Britain.

At national and EU levels within Europe, a number of counter-terrorism strategies exist. Some of these (such as the European Council Counter-Terrorism strategy of 2005[6], and the UK's counter-terrorism strategy "CONTEST" of 2003[7]) codify the response to the current threat into four "pillars", called – in the case of the EU – Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Respond. The "Pursue" work includes military and intelligence action against current known terrorist individuals and organisations, and at the EU level includes legislative measures such as the European Arrest Warrant and activities concerning the pooling and sharing of intelligence through such bodies as Europol.

In the "Prevent" strand, **the emphasis is on identifying and tackling the potential causes of terrorism such as Islamic community radicalisation**. Much research and communications have been undertaken recently on the nature of the Muslim communities in Europe and the factors which may be leading to violent radicalisation among some of their members. A number of recent studies in the UK have drawn similar conclusions about the nature and dynamics of these communities[8].

A closer analysis of community dynamics across European countries **shows a striking similarity in many of the factors affecting different Muslim communities**. Some, or all of these, may be feeding the Islamist terrorist threat arising from some sectors of the community, although it should be noted that no one

factor will automatically lead to violence, and that the factors which do cause a person to cross the line from living responsibly in a democratic society to being prepared to commit a terrorist act will be complex, multi-faceted, and in many cases distinctly personal. Nevertheless, the following factors apply in broadly equal measure to a number of different Muslim communities in various European countries, and will merit much further analysis to aid policy formulation.

The first of these is a higher-than-average level of unemployment, and evidence of other indicators of socio-economic deprivation. A recent survey in the UK found that almost a quarter of Muslims over the age of 16 are classed as long-term unemployed, compared to just 3.4 percent of the population as a whole[9]. In France, reports suggest Muslim unemployment is running at double the average for the population as a whole[10], while in Germany, it is claimed that unemployment among the Turkish community is more than twice that of the national average[11]. One study found that high rates of unemployment were the single biggest worry for Muslim communities in France, Spain, Germany and the UK[12]. While these factors may lead to social unrest and alienation of Muslim communities, especially if the unemployment is linked to real or perceived racism in the job market, they may also lead to embitterment among young Muslims about their medium and longer term prospects, which could feed into more radical responses.

The second factor found in Muslim communities across most European countries is a strong geographical clustering of Muslim groups, amounting in some cases to "ghettoisation" of the community. Across Europe it is the case that Muslims communities (like most immigrant communities in general) are clustered in major urban areas, and within that in specific districts and *banlieues*. In the UK, for example, the Pakistani Muslim community constitute approximately 15 percent of the northern English city of Bradford, and Bangladeshis represent over a third of the East London district of Tower Hamlets[13]. In France, largely North African communities tend to concentrate in parts of major cities such as Paris and Marseilles, representing approximately a quarter of the population of the latter[14]. A lack of integration with neighbouring sections of the community can run the risk of leading to entrenchment of alienation on both sides of the divide.

The element of alienation appears to be a significant, but complex one. In particular, many younger 2nd and 3rd generation Muslims across Europe have expressed a "double alienation" both from the attitudes and culture of their parents and grandparents (which generally relate to "home" areas in the Muslim world and have little or no resonance to children born and brought up in Europe), and from the Western cultural ideals and expressions of indigenous neighbours.

This complex sense of alienation may be leading, in turn, to a growing religiosity among younger generation Muslims in Europe as a response to perceived rootlessness and alienation. **Solace may be found in generic expressions of the**

***ummah*, which pay less credence to particular nation states either in the West or the Muslim world**. One recent study in the Netherlands found these factors to be significant among younger Muslims[15]. In Britain, a recent study found that 74 percent of young Muslims prefer women to wear the *hijab* or veil, compared with just 28 percent of over-55s[16]. This may reflect a form of rejection of the ideals of older immigrants who sought to assimilate more with their host society rather than to stand out. From a terrorism perspective, this generational cleavage may be significant: many recent terrorist cases have supported Mark Sageman's analysis that *jihadist* terrorists are very largely drawn from the young male bracket[17].

Another reaction to alienation and socio-economic deprivation in Muslim communities in Europe could be the occasional explosion of unrest and rioting in Muslim districts, as seen notably in Paris and other parts of France in 2005, and in Bradford in 2001. In both cases, serious unrest was triggered by assertive police action against Muslim youths in particular parts of the urban district (in the case of Paris leading to the accidental death of two North African men[18]). However, the incidents are complex and may equally be triggered by such issues as police encroachment on criminal trade in particular districts, or inter-ethnic youth gang warfare in the case of Bradford. It may equally be the case, however, that alienation and grievance in Muslim communities against the "authorities" could express itself as much in radicalisation and terrorist acts as in civil unrest, given the right conditions.

In many European countries, one of the key centres of radicalisation in the community **appears to be the university and higher education environment**. To some extents this is not surprising, as this is where large numbers of 2nd and 3rd generation Muslims who are battling with their identity in a European context will be found. It is also the case that many previous terrorist movements have included an important element of radicalisation in university environments, such as the *Brigatte Rossi* and *Baader Meinhof* groups in Italy and Germany respectively in the 1970s and 1980s. **Universities and colleges are places where angry young people with time on their hands and an interest in making their mark in the world can be found**, and this will probably apply as much to Muslim communities as to others. It is noteworthy that three of the four bombers of London in July 2005 were former university and college students who had dropped out of their courses to train as terrorists.

Also significant as centres of radicalisation are prisons, where a growing number of Muslim members of the community can be found. Here again, feelings of alienation and rejection from society will be strong, as will be the fact that people have plenty of time on the hands. Prisons can also act as "platforms for proselytism"[19], where extremist literature can be circulated freely in languages which the authorities are generally unable to read, and vulnerable and dislocated young men can be recruited.

On the other side of the community fence is a widespread and **growing sense of reaction to Muslim cultural symbols and practices**, notably that of veil-wearing. In many northern European countries, the early 2000s have been marked by controversies over the issue of headscarves and veils in a number of contexts. Examples include the controversial dismissal of a *niqab*-wearing teacher in Dewsbury in 2007 (completely coincidentally the town from which the three above-mentioned London bombers hailed), the row over pupils wearing *hijabs* in Paris in 2003, and a row over the wearing of a headscarf by a television presenter in Denmark in 2006. In all these cases, elements of the media have contributed to a sense of cultural panic, which can have the negative effect of inculcating a sense of "Islamophobia" in indigenous European society. This, in turn, can feed a sense of alienation and isolation within the Muslim community, in a worsening downward spiral of community disintegration.

The final factor which shows a remarkable degree of similarity across many European countries is the question of **governmental engagement with political groups within Muslim communities whose credentials for adequately speaking for the "moderate majority" are open to question**. The obvious example in the UK is the Muslim Council of Britain. In Germany, the *Islamische Gemeinschaft Deutschland* and the Turkish *Milli Görüs* organisations have shown they wish to be viewed as the official representatives of the German Muslim population, although their agenda is one based ultimately on extremist messages such as the implementation of *Sharia* law[20], which is not necessarily the will of the moderate majority of German Muslims. In France, similar concerns revolve around the *Union des Organisations Islamiques de France*, which is at the forefront of the government's Islamic Council, and in Italy around the *Unione delle Comunitá de Organizzazioni Islmische in Italia*, which is also the central government's prime partner in dialogue within the Muslim community[21]. In these and other European countries there has been a great deal of effort expended recently in "engagement" with Muslim community spokespeople, and there is evidence that such groups representing a more extreme and strident view are often the ones that have the right connections in government circles and are the first to be consulted.

Given this complex web of global, regional and local factors which may be contributing to extreme Islamist radicalisation and feeding the "roots" of terrorism, **what should be the policy responses in Europe?**

Clearly, the "Pursue" strands of terrorist strategies must continue. Whatever the societal conditions which breed potential terrorists in our *banlieues* and side-streets, **there is a real Al Qaeda organisation out there which must continue to be confronted with penetrative intelligence, with interdiction and with force**. Intelligence and security agencies across Europe must continue to cooperate bilaterally and multilaterally, with the default emphasis on sharing operational

intelligence to the most effective degree. Much has been achieved since 9/11: one estimate suggests that over 700 arrests in connection with Al Qaeda were made across Europe in the period between the attacks in New York and Washington DC and the end of 2004[22], which must surely have had a severely disruptive effect on the terrorist organisation. Meanwhile, the military struggle against Al Qaeda leaders in the mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan has to continue, if only to disrupt its planning and preparation of terrorist acts.

On the question of intelligence cooperation, **a centralised EU operational intelligence or security agency looks uncertain in the foreseeable future**, for reasons of source and technique protection. The Director General of Britain's Security Service (MI5), for one, has recently stated that she is strongly opposed to a "compulsory exchange of intelligence" within Europe for these reasons[23]. However, agencies such as SitCen and Europol may have a need to strengthen their sharing of assessments, trends, technologies, terrorist *modus operandi*, and analyses of radicalisation. This information is very significant to the Europe-wide fight against terrorism. Directives such as those concerning European Arrest Warrants and Data Retention could also be very important.

The area where much more work needs to be done, and work of real substance, **is in the area of understanding the local, regional and national societal processes which are underpinning feelings of grievance amongst Muslim communities and encouraging some of their members to turn to more radical and destructive alternatives**. Although the nature of these communities differs across Europe, I have shown that there are some striking trends across European nations which need to be understood and analysed collectively. This seems to be true despite different communal policies from "assimilation" (such as that pursued in France) to "multiculturalism" (as seen notably in Britain). These are the local issues that run alongside the globalised message issued by Usama Bin Laden in the picture of *jihadist* terrorism.

We must also engage much more intelligently and effectively with our Muslim communities. It is notable that three of the four London bombers of July 2005 were originally from the moderate *Barelvi*-Sunni Pakistani community, rather than from radical *Salafist* communities. There have been numerous other examples of terrorists arising from such communities, such as the Tel Aviv bomber Asif Hanif, or the attempted "shoe-bomber" Richard Reid, who came from a staunchly conservative and respectable *Deobandi*-Sunni Pakistani community. None of these groups are particularly represented by the vocal and radical Muslim Council of Britain, even though this has often been the group commenting publicly on Muslim community relations in Britain and the one invited into the Prime Minister's chambers. Youths from poorly represented moderate communities across Europe are at risk of falling prey to extremist jihadist messages, and we have to understand much better than we do currently how and why this is happening.

This, I would argue, is the space in which the real war on terrorism in the West will ultimately be won or lost, and not in the caves and mountains of Afghanistan alone.

This paper is based on an address delivered to Working Group 9 of the European Ideas Network (EIN) at the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Berlin, 22 March 2007.

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Book:
Bergen, Peter L., *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, (New York: Free Press, 2006)
Book Chapter:
Hafez, Mohammed M. "From Marginalization to Massacres. A Political Process Explanation of GIA Violence in Algeria", Wiktorowicz, Quintan (ed.) *Islamic Activism. A Social Movement Theory Approach*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 37-60