

Ignoring the lessons of the past

Robert Lambert highlights the extent to which previous experiences of terrorism have been discounted by policy makers and opinion formers in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7.

Even though London had been the target of terrorist bomb attacks since the end of the nineteenth century virtually all of the political and media responses to 7/7 chose to ignore that previous experience and to address it as an entirely separate phenomenon (Phillips, 2006; Gove, 2007). This followed the pattern set by responses to 9/11 and indicated the extent to which UK counter-terrorism strategy had become subsumed within a US led global war on terror (Berman, 2003). Tony Blair's key role in promoting al-Qaida as a new and exceptional terrorist threat was all the more significant given his own contemporaneous experience of negotiating with an exponent of 'old' terrorism, Sinn Fein, either the political representative of the Provisional IRA, or the IRA itself (Lambert, 2008a, 2008b). As Marie Breen Smyth notes, this view has three problematic features: one, it 'tends towards a-historicity ... ignoring the historical experiences of numerous countries'; two, it 'exceptionalises the experience of the US and al-Qaida'; and three, it 'tends towards "state-centrism", with the "terrorist" defined as the (security) problem and inquiry restricted to the assembling of information and data that would solve or eradicate the "problem" as the state defines it' (Smyth, 2007:1). Of particular relevance is Smith's observation that this new terrorism account 'ignores the roots of terrorism and the contribution of the state itself to the creation of the conditions in which terrorist action by non-state actors occurs'(Smith, 2007:1).

Moreover, once Tony Blair demonstrated his willingness to stand shoulder to shoulder with the US president, George Bush, in the war on terror it became increasingly apposite for al-Qaida propagandists to describe the UK as an acolyte to its US enemy. In this sense al-Qaida could be described as an adaptive social movement with an ability to engage with the domestic profiles of different countries and regions, as David Lehany argues in respect of al-Qaida's influence in South East Asia (Lehany, 2005). Al-Qaida's iconic spokesman Osama bin Laden ensured that his UK supporters had templates to adopt and use as the terrorist movement stepped up its propaganda responses to the war on terror:

Our actions are a reaction to yours, which are destruction and killing of our people as is happening in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine. By what measure of kindness are your killed considered innocents while ours are considered worthless? By what school [of thought] is your blood considered blood while our blood is water? Therefore, it is [only] just to respond in kind, and the one who started it is more to blame... (Lawrence, 2005: 234).

Osama bin Laden's powerful propaganda messages provided fuel for local events in London such as Abu Hamza's meeting at the Finsbury Park Mosque on the first anniversary of 9/11 which was provocatively billed, 'a towering day in history' (Lambert, 2008a). While this event

alerted the wider community to the activities of Abu Hamza and like-minded extremists, the fact is that Abu Hamza (along with Abdullah el Faisal and Abu Qatada) had by then assiduously cultivated small but strong UK followings over a long period of time. One of their great attributes as leaders was to help young Muslims with a wide range of welfare issues. Very often new converts to Islam, no less than Muslims newly arrived in London, would need help with religious practice, diet, housing, benefits, relationships, employment and many other matters upon which their new leaders were adept at providing practical help often at times and in places where more conventional religious leaderships might be found lacking (Lambert, 2008a).

Not least in the style and manner of his delivery, the 7/7 bomber Mohammad Siddique Khan reveals the influence Abu Hamza and Abdullah el Faisal have had on him:

By turning our back on this work, we are guaranteeing ourselves humiliation and the anger of Allah. Jihad is an obligation on every single one of us, men and women. our so-called scholars of today are content with their Toyotas and semi-detached houses. They are useless. They should stay at home and leave the job to real men – the true inheritors of the prophet.
(BBC news online)

To further illustrate this perspective the case of Abdullah el Faisal is illuminating. By 9/11 el Faisal had become a familiar speaker on a national if fringe UK circuit of Muslim student and Muslim community events. While some of these events would be public events with audiences of up to 500, in most cases they would consist of small study circles, numbering around twenty, where attendance was by invitation and where young Muslims would be encouraged to adopt an al-Qaida world-view. At different times el Faisal appeared with al-Qaida propagandists Abu Hamza and Abu Qatada to whom he was unofficially junior but with whom he agreed

on key points and with whom he enjoyed cordial relations. Unlike the other two however he was especially influential with members of the black Muslim convert community where he enjoyed high status. Significantly, the UK Home Office narrative of the July 7 bombings records that el Faisal's calls to violence had found a willing audience in Jermaine Lindsay, who killed himself and 26 others on a Piccadilly line underground train near Russell Square in the 2005 terrorist attack (Home Office 2006).

Since 9/11 UK counter-terrorism has not been immune to the war on terror's overarching 'you are either with us or against us' attitude to Muslim communities. Politicians are certainly more comfortable when they can appear in the media being tough on terrorism. In most instances this will manifest itself in support for extended powers of detention and expanded police powers generally.

Invariably police chiefs will mirror such postures just as the UK's Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) did in endorsing the government's call for a massively increased period of pre-charge detention in 2005. At such times there appears to be little consideration of the likely impact of such measures on terrorist recruitment. Instead the debate is typically between 'tough' politicians and police chiefs – in one corner – and human rights lawyers and activists who are caricatured in the media as the 'bleeding heart liberals' – in the other. Moreover, while counter-terrorism has long recognised the value of community intelligence it tends to see this role as falling to non specialist colleagues – community or neighbourhood police officers (Innes, 2006).

However, when addressing Muslim community groups post 7/7 Paddy Hillyard is right to highlight

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the significance of the Northern Ireland experience of 'suspect communities' over thirty years in a counter-terrorist context. But while all Northern Irish communities might have suffered to some degree the evidence is clear in demonstrating that one religious group – Irish Catholics – bore the brunt of stereotyping, profiling and stigmatisation. On this basis Tarique Ghaffur and Ali Dezai – senior Muslim police voices in London – make brave and important points in arguing against the blanket profiling of Asian Muslim communities (Judd 2006). In doing so, however, both officers unintentionally compound the greater risk of minority sections

of Muslim communities – especially Salafis and Islamists – being stigmatised in the same way Irish Catholics were.

Certainly, it is misleading and counter-productive to endorse the stereotyping, profiling and

conflating of Salafis and Islamists with al-Qaida terrorism. However, the superficial argument that the root causes of 7/7 lie with Islamists and Salafis gained further ground when Ed Husain and other former Islamists launched the Quilliam Foundation (a self styled 'counter-extremism think tank' run by former members of Hizb ut Tahrir) in 2008. Rather, the fact that al-Qaida terrorists adapt and distort Salafi and Islamist approaches to Islam does not mean that Salafis and Islamists are implicitly linked to terrorism or extremism still less that individual Islamists and Salafis are likely to be terrorists or extremists. No more was Catholicism a key pointer to Provisional IRA terrorism. Equally, it is true that UK recruits to al-Qaida have a range of backgrounds that will sometimes include prior affiliation to, or family association with Sufi or Barelvi traditions. However, it is axiomatic that by the time they become al-

Qaida suicide bombers (or other active terrorists) UK Muslim recruits have bought into an ideology and thus distorted strands of Salafi and Islamist thinking. That is why Salafis and Islamists often have the best antidotes to al-Qaida propaganda once it has taken hold. To conflate them with the problem is to inhibit their willingness to immunise their communities against it and to ignore previous experience. ■

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