

Causes of jihadi terrorism: beyond paintballing and social exclusion

Johnathan Githens-Mazer argues popular explanatory accounts of Islamic terrorism have failed to take account of the experiences of radicalised Muslims and the local and historical injustices immigrant groups face.

To date, most approaches to Islamically inspired 'violent extremism' have used theology, psychology or structural factors to explain the occurrence of radical violent *takfiri* jihadism (*takfiri* refers to radicalised Muslims who feel that it is a religious and moral obligation to wage Jihad against *kafir* or non-believers). The British Government has emphasised a failure in social and cultural integration into 'British society' as a key reason behind threat of Islamic terrorism in Britain. Many prominent scholars assert that Islamist suicide bombers result from individual naïveté, the ability of religious elites to twist the thoughts of young impressionable men, and the influence of peer pressure and the apparent attraction of events such as paintballing and five-a-side football. These approaches have led scholars to identify 'pathologies' of violence, so that the actions of individuals such as Mohammed Siddique Khan, who carried out the 7/7 bombings, are interpreted as representing both personal family frustrations and the inability to cope with modern British society. All of these approaches, though potentially valid, ignore the most obvious source to understand 'radicalisation': the radicalised themselves. Interviews with those who are themselves radicalised, or with those who have been close to those who have engaged with radical violent *takfiri*

jihadism suggest that it is a mistake to analyse these experiences in a historical vacuum.

The case against existing explanations

Psychological disposition, resource mobilisation and religion have all been used to explain 'Islamic radicalisation'. Islamic theology and practice have often been used to explain *takfiri* jihadism, either as a result of specific psychological traits inherent to Islam (splitting and rage at bad objects, and the identification of God with the superego), or as the inspiration of millenarianism due to Islamic 'spiritual intoxication'. (Phillips et al., 2007: 218; Sageman, 2004; Shore, 2006; Jackson, 2005: 54-55) This analysis popularly reverberates in popular Western secular political discourse, where Muslims are accused of simply not 'getting Western liberal freedoms and lifestyles'. (Gurr, 1970: 13; Zadise et al., 2007, 503) However, any causal link between Islam and radical violent *takfiri* jihadism is impossible to prove, because of the prevailing weight of counter-factual evidence. There are an almost infinite amount of cases where Islam has 'failed' to cause any form of political violence (in fact, quite the opposite).

Deprivation, whether economic, social or in terms of perceptions of alienation and exclusion have also been proposed as a cause of

Islamically inspired political violence. (Sambanis, 2004, 165; Krueger and Malečková, 2003; Sageman, 2004; Pape, 2005; von Hippel, 2002, 26) Empirical studies consistently demonstrate this not to be the case; that low income is not a cause of terrorism. (Abbas, 2007; Rehman, 2007; Shore, 2006) Despite this empirical data, social alienation is still being touted as the cause of *takfiri* jihadism, asserting that radicalisation results from interactions with unsupportive 'host-nation' societies. (Sageman, 2004; Abbas, 2007; Shore, 2006) 'Failed integration' theses of radicalisation are at the very least methodologically suspect, as they fail to take into account the basic fact that despite the few examples of non-integrated Muslims in Britain who do become radical violent *takfiri* jihadists, countless others are equally socially excluded, yet do not participate in this, or any other form of violence. Furthermore, individuals such Siddique Khan, appear to have been well integrated into both the Muslim and wider British communities.

An alternative but related hypothesis has seen a suggestion that peer groups cause radicalisation (the 'paintballing' hypothesis), wherein radical violent *takfiri* jihadism becomes a function of discretionary time, a minimum of countervailing risks, and membership in social networks rather than a result of ideology. (Bloom, 2007, 36; Shore, 2006, 165) I have termed it here as the 'paintballing' hypothesis, because it is popularly depicted as a situation where a 'good young Muslim' falls in with a bad crowd, or a peer group which ratchets up sectarian religious tensions leading to more violent and spectacular actions, a process often depicted as beginning with a paintballing outing, and ending with a backpack full of explosives on the Tube. This thesis is often combined with assertions that such individuals are 'prey for violent dogmas'; naïvely susceptible to manipulative and unscrupulous religious elites. (Habeck, 2006: 103) While there is no denying that peer groups play a role in this process, they cannot be understood to be

causal, as there are many peer groups and few terrorists.

Listening to *takfiri* jihadists and the wider islamist community

If these popular accounts don't have causal traction in explaining participation in radical violent *takfiri* jihadism, what explains its occurrence? Specific cases of radicalisation render some complex but useful insights into the causes of *takfiri* jihadism. For all radical violent *takfiri* jihadists, the *Umma* is under siege from the West, though how this is expressed or conceived, in the context of local conditions and drivers, varies greatly from case to case. (Ranstorp, 2005: 3; Shore, 2006: 160; Githens-Mazer, 2008) Radical violent *takfiri* jihadists operating closely to a 'Franchise' model of operations in their institutional relationships with al-Qaeda foment insurgency by ideologically pitting Islam vs. the West/Christianity, while simultaneously seeking to recruit those disaffected by local issues. Global perceptions of local injustice are foci for propaganda by Al-Qaeda and other *takfiri* Jihadist recruiters seeking new members amongst immigrants in mosque environments, directly referring to 'Muslims under siege' in key flashpoints like Chechnya, Kashmir, Iraq, and most significantly Palestine. (Gerges, 2007: 286-9) In this context, vulnerability and religious ideology begin to make sense: individuals who are 'pre-disposed' to becoming radical may be recruited through interaction with existing radicals and subsequently become 'operationalised'. Shared perceptions of a universal conflict between radical Islam and the West both rely on, and reinforce, linkages which exist not only between committed *takfiri* jihadists, but also amongst immigrant communities at regional, national and international levels, propagating a belief that where immigrant experiences are difficult, the *Umma* will provide stability and help.

In practice, this means that radical violent *takfiri* jihadists are being recruited on the basis of the interpretation of local drivers

understood in a transnational context; experiences of repression and violence interpreted in a personally and culturally defined past. For recruiters trying to attract individuals to participate in radical violent *takfiri* jihadism, this creates a meaningful basis to capitalise on a pervasive sense amongst Muslims in Europe and beyond that the West is enjoined on a 'crusade' to oppress the Muslim world, its culture and beliefs. They are able to do this by citing events such as the Danish cartoon depictions of Mohammed, US support for Israel, and the invasion of Iraq. This 'prism' effect underpins processes of radicalisation, by helping to explain how individuals recognise and identify injustices and grievances in a collective context, and helps to determine what are subsequently considered rational reactions to such events. Current events are being understood not only in the global *Umma*, but through life on street corners and offices in Bradford, London and Leeds. Yet, while injustice is often cited as a mobilising factor in the social movement literature, it is equally often absent as a causal factor in discussions of Islamic 'radicalisation' and/or vulnerability. Where injustice is discussed, it is only referred to in relation to currently limited economic, social and political opportunities, (the social exclusion and paintballing hypotheses) rather than with reference to historical injustices of the past, especially colonial history.

Conclusions

An overemphasis of social exclusion and/or individual psychology fails to grasp the cultural 'canvas' on which subsequent events and actions are painted and understood. This is to say, the sermons of firebrands such as Abu Hamsa during the late 90's and early 21st century resonated with North Africans living in the basement of the Finsbury Park Mosque in the late 1990's early 2000's by citing historical and contemporary examples of violence and repression against the *Umma* in a seamless fashion, thereby linking histories, identities and narratives

with current politics and personal experiences. This helps to explain how radical violent *takfiri* Jihadism is being mobilised through perceptions of 'injustice' and grievance. Hamsa managed to link events in Palestine, Bosnia, Chechnya, the French Massacre of Algerians during the 8 May 1945 Massacre, and the apparent insensitivity of official British Governmental interaction with the *Umma* in terms of both domestic and foreign policies. Radical *takfiri* Jihadist recruiters tap into both personally and socially defined repertoires of resonant myths, memories and symbols of identity and experience, and any subsequent attraction to *takfiri* Jihadist violence lies in its coupling of the resonance of legacies of past colonial oppression and violence and more recent blocked political liberalisation and democratisation in various 'home states', with difficult social, political and economic circumstances for Muslim immigrant groups in the United Kingdom. ■

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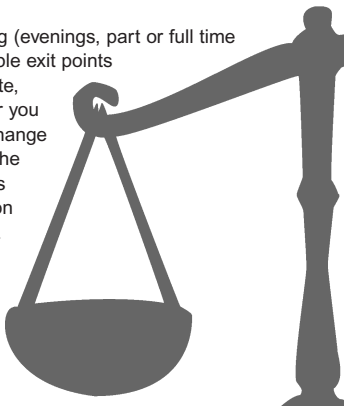
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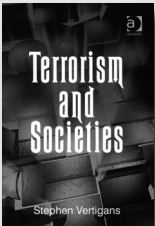
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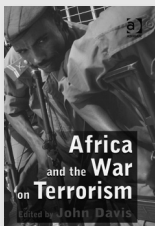
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