



The Sociology of Terrorism

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We will not win the battle against this global extremism unless we win it at the level of values as much as force, unless we show we are even-handed, fair and just in our application of those values to the world.

Tony Blair¹

Introduction

The declared 'War on Terror' has been six years in the making but its origins stretch back over a much longer period and its consequences are likely to last for decades to come. We are watching but a phase, albeit a particularly pervasive and pernicious one, in a terrorist campaign that has both long-term objectives and a global perspective. The roots of that campaign, centred on Islamist fundamentalism, can be found in the teachings of Sayyid Qutb, a literary critic in the 1930s and later an activist in Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Qutb's writings, while not being the first to enunciate the fundamentalist Muslim view, have been adapted and extended by other radicals, some of whom can be found in today's Al-Qa'ida terrorist network.²

The crux of Qutb's philosophy, based on a period living in America, was a rejection of the modern Western lifestyle and the decadence, corruption and promiscuity that he believed accompanied it. He preached a return to the essentials of the Muslim faith and defence of any Muslim land from the encroachment of Western values spread by impious regimes. This attack by the West, he argued, should be resisted by armed struggle (*jihad*), a concept that has largely been applied by way of terrorism, the age-old weapon of the weak against

a more powerful foe. Present-day Islamic extremism is just one manifestation of a rejection of Western values. While very few of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims will have heard of, let alone subscribe to, the ideas of theorists such as Qutb, the majority are clearly sympathetic to the notion that Western culture is undermining what it means to be a Muslim and that many Muslim lands are under direct threat.³

There can be few better examples of this clash of values than the popularity of Al-Qa'ida's leader, Osama bin Laden, across large swathes of the globe. The 2005 Pew Global Attitude survey in Muslim countries, and not just Arab countries, revealed that Osama bin Laden retains a significant following, with a majority supporting him in both Jordan and Pakistan. (Support has dropped in the 2006 survey.) In the UK, according to one poll, 19 per cent of British Muslims had 'respect' for bin Laden while another poll suggested that 13 per cent of British Muslims regarded the suicide bombers who attacked London on 7 July 2005 as 'martyrs'.⁴ In Holland, academics estimate that 10 to 15 per cent of the one million Muslims in the country sympathize with the *jihadist* ideology.

If one is to understand the support for, and sociology of, modern international terrorism, and hopefully thereby ultimately overcome its excesses, then it is crucial first to examine the reasons for this clash of values and second to unravel the perceptions that fuel the passions behind the terrorist's mask. Terrorism is a tactic, not the cause, of a larger struggle. Hence, it needs to be tackled by policies as well as policing, sociology

as well as soldiering. It requires a combination of measures that will persuade the hydra to release its grip on the rock, rather than cut off its many replaceable tentacles. In the case of people, this is a matter of winning hearts and minds.

Clash of values

When discussing issues of terrorism, it is commonplace to talk about the vulnerabilities of our society. We examine critical national infrastructures, key sites, important figures and events, all as part of a routine risk assessment process. However, assessing vulnerabilities to a particular threat is a reactive process that is part of a vicious circle of action and counteraction. If one is to break out of this non-virtuous cycle then it would perhaps be more appropriate to analyze values rather than vulnerabilities in our risk calculations. This is especially relevant if we are failing – as clearly we are – to present sufficient values to counter the growing wave of international terrorism. As one commentator has stated: 'It is not the magnetism of Al-Qa'ida we need to worry about but the vacuum at the heart of our own society'.⁵

The UK Prime Minister spoke in August 2006 of protecting our (Western) values in the face of the terrorist threat.⁶ Liberty, justice and democracy 'can only be won by showing that our values are stronger, better and more just, more fair than the alternative', he said. This approach makes two key assumptions: one that the West's value system is clearly superior to anything the opposition can offer; and second that the best way to win against the competition is to reinforce one's own cultural values. Both these points need closer sociological examination in an effort to understand modern-day terrorism.

When facing a sizeable and dangerous challenge, it is perhaps all too easy to see the problem in stark and uncompromising terms. Such a viewpoint is certainly less problematic to convey to a threatened and perplexed population looking for clear choices and firm direction. Hence, it is not surprising to see Manichean adherents announcing

that the liberal democracies represent the forces of light while the fundamentalist networks represent the forces of darkness. Accordingly, the world is all too readily divided into good and evil, with no middle way; 'either you are with us or you are with the terrorists'.⁷ This dualist message is often translated into a broader war on Islam that fuels the feeling of a clash of cultures, if not civilizations. Even if misplaced and mendacious, the label is hard to remove once applied. It is a potent incitement for actors to take sides, even extremes, and any attempt by one side to defend itself becomes a recruiting sergeant for



The ideas of Sayyid Qutb have shaped Al Qa'ida.

the other. The more terrorist assaults on the West, the more the West tries to defend itself, and the more hysteria is generated among Muslims (in general) who feel under attack.

In truth, Manichaeism is one of the world's great historical heresies, a heresy for which millions have perished in years past – in the Crusades in medieval Europe, in the Inquisition in the middle centuries, and in the Nazi persecution of the last century. Yet this very idea of dualism runs counter to many religious teachings that preach tolerance in the face of difference. When people rather

than organizations become the real focus of attention, then they are never wholly good or wholly bad; all but the most deranged are susceptible to the same urges, fears and hopes of the majority. Some may be drawn temporarily or permanently, powerfully or weakly, to the support of strong individuals or ideas – whatever the label – but sympathies and allegiances can and do change, and very few of the large group are inherently destructive or malicious.⁸

To fail to exploit this human richness by banishing people, countries or organizations into the 'evil' basket – or by applying terms such as nihilists, Islamo-fascists or crusaders – tends to set up negative waves in the wider cultural and geopolitical environments. If the cry is reinforced by repetition, it simply creates a stereotype that leads to a strengthening of prejudices and a hardening of positions over a protracted period. It is therefore not helpful in removing misunderstandings and finding the middle (grey) ground in complicated situations. In the case of understanding the terrorists' mindset, it is crucial to explore with moderate supporters as well as extremist advocates what the middle ground looks like; it was achieved in Northern Ireland and can be achieved elsewhere.

As for the values that the West espouses and defends – even exports to other countries in Muslim heartlands – then it is important to be sure that the values are appropriate and appreciated. To be sure, the value systems of the Western and Islamic worlds are different in many ways. Islam from its inception saw no distinction between church and state; they were one and indivisible. The West's separation of church and state has allowed more material elements to intervene, often under the banner of individual freedom and personal choice. Both systems have their strengths and weaknesses relevant to the communities they serve. However, the religious and cultural differences often manifest themselves in outward expressions of dress codes, women's rights, daily abstinences, etc. The wearing of certain headdress by Muslim women is an example that has recently surfaced in



the UK and France: for some Muslim women, the veil is a choice that reflects their beliefs and wish for modesty. At the same time, while the refusal by the Taliban in Afghanistan to allow women to work or be unaccompanied outside the home seems harsh, it is worth remembering that, but a century ago, women in the UK were denied the right to vote, were expected to stay at home with the children, and wore long, flowing dresses often with a veil covering the face. Excesses besides, we do not all progress at the same speed.

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The suppression of cultural and religious rights – no matter from which quarter – will often be interpreted as either oppression or alienation. In an effort to overcome these sentiments, integration and multiculturalism may be tried and tested. Some may argue that the death of the film-maker Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam in November 2004 by a Muslim attacker who spoke excellent Dutch and was studying for a diploma would indicate that the attack was not due to a lack of integration or opportunity, but an ideological clash, and a violent one at that. Others believe it is Muslim alienation, and not radical Islam, that is the true danger here. They argue that the very lack of integration within Western societies is not something that can be solved by the transformation of Arab or other Muslim countries into democracies. One writer even concludes that Europeans are threatened internally by radical Islam in a much more severe way than Americans are externally.⁹ Certainly, it appears that the home-grown terrorist is Europe's nightmare. Whatever the driving force, differences

will persist and can only be dealt with by separation or tolerance. The terrorist will thrive on the severity of the demarcation.

What can be said with certainty is that Islamic violence is fuelled by a feeling of collective victimization and societal inequity. By virtue of a worldwide Islamic community (*umma*), Muslims feel the need to defend their fellow believers. This is not a simple protest movement by a minority against grievances such as Iraq, Chechnya and Palestine, although these are powerful motivators in their own right. Rather, it is a collective show of resistance to the perceived assault on Muslims and Islamic values anywhere and everywhere. The apparent injustices are only exacerbated by the apparent lopsidedness of the wider political environment: UN resolutions that are enforced against one party but ignored by others, weapon proliferation treaties that are applied in one quarter but not another, international laws that are enforced against one challenger but ignored elsewhere. The facts may justify the actions taken in certain circumstances but it is the wider perception that matters. If political dealings are perceived to be marked by hypocrisy, duplicity and unilateralism, then there is little chance that good intentions and good relations will thrive – and thereby defeat the terrorist. Until this perception is corrected there is no prospect of winning favour, never mind hearts and minds.

Certainly, the West lacks the collective moral and political authority to preach from any high ground when it comes to a value judgement. Incidents at Abu Graib, the retention of Guantanamo, the use of extraordinary rendition in the case of prisoners and the use of cluster munitions in populated areas have not won converts to the Western cause. They have bothered many Muslims if only because they have evoked memories of past colonial mistakes and mistreatments. If anything indicates the rejection of Western values in the 'War on Terror', then it has been the fact that wherever democratic space has been cleared in Muslim lands in response to Western

calls, parties with non-Western values have come to the fore e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in Gaza. This fact perhaps reinforces the view that democracy in Western terms (belief in man) is anathema to Islamic institutions (belief in Allah). It can hardly be a marker for success in the future. Some radical reappraisals are necessary. Even the UK prime minister in his speech to an American audience in August acknowledged that if values were to prevail then it would require 'us to change dramatically the focus of our policy'.

Clash of wills

If values are crucial to the sociological underpinning of the terrorist and counter-terrorist campaigns, then the battle of wills can be seen in the face of the suicide bomber. Suicide bombings have become the world's most common form of terrorism since 9/11. The pace of suicide attacks worldwide has accelerated so quickly that three-quarters of all suicide bombings in the past quarter century have been carried out since 9/11; the majority so far have been in Iraq and Sri Lanka.

To most people the act of blowing oneself up, along with other innocent people, is an act of idolatrous barbarism. In many eyes, both east and west, it is irrational and heretical. However, in creating fear (the essence of terrorism) it is very effective and by far the most powerful tool in the terrorists' arsenal apart from nuclear weapons. In spite of both Christianity and Islam speaking out against the act of suicide, for some Muslim adherents it is seen as a case of martyrdom, not suicide. Sacrificing oneself for the greater good is believed to be the ultimate, noble act. As other avenues of resistance have become thwarted or ineffective – while the feeling of apparent injustice and perceived oppression continues – it is unlikely that such attacks will abate.

Europe faces an awesome task of countering the Islamic extremist, and especially the suicide bomber. Although small in number, he or she is part of a fifth column within the larger population.¹⁰ There are 13 million

Muslims in the EU out of a total population of 457 million. The Muslim population of France is now nearly 10 per cent (six million) of the population, while the three largest Dutch cities will have around half of their populations as non-Western (mostly Muslim) by 2020. With fertility rates declining in Western societies but increasing in Muslim ones, then the balance is expected to shift even further towards Muslims. It is perhaps why a leading writer on Islamic affairs has said that by the end of the century 'at the very latest', the European continent would be 'part of the Arabic west, the Maghreb'.¹¹

Several leading radical Islamic theologians speak of the Islamic conquest of Europe simply by allowing demographics and Muslim conversions to take their course.¹²

They see the adoption of the Muslim faith and the submission of Christian Europe to Islamic rule as inevitable and an obligation of all Muslims to achieve. Many second- and third-generation European Muslims, however, are not prepared to wait for demographic change. They consider the fundamentalist (*Salafist*) understanding of Islam to be the only way to behave. As a result, more and more young people are turning to Muslim schools, online literature, satellite TV and the powerful rhetoric of groups that counsel belligerence and inveigh against assimilation. Such is the breeding ground for the next suicide bombers. They may be misguided, but they are not necessarily impoverished, uneducated or pathological.¹³

This clash of wills, as witnessed through the suicide bomber, can be expected to worsen in the years ahead unless the root causes are at best removed or at least alleviated to some degree. It will be insufficient to rely on law-enforcement and intelligence services to catch the plotters and operatives. Political and societal actions rather than words or promises will be necessary to shift the balance away from despair (for a minority) to hope (for the majority). The 'arc of extremism stretching across the Middle East and touching, with increasing definition, countries far outside that

region must paint a different future for Muslim, Jew and Christian; Arab and Western; wealthy and developing nations alike'.¹⁴

A radical review

Although policy-makers have repeatedly acknowledged the importance of winning hearts and minds and spent millions of pounds or dollars in trying to win them, both politically and societally, the effort can scarcely be judged a success. Alienation and victimization – whether real or perceived – among a considerable proportion of the worldwide Muslim community needs to be recognized and responded to positively. If unaddressed or dealt with in token ways, there is a risk that the world will slide back into international policies based on spheres of influence; in effect, the 'War on Terror' will become the new Cold War.

The way ahead can only be realized through the 'alliance of moderation'.¹⁵ This is a sociological challenge as much as a political one. It will require a radical examination of policies and strategies, led by America as much as by Europe. It will necessitate some form of negotiation with extreme elements in the Muslim world, even if conducted away from the table rather than around it; it will necessitate the withdrawal of forces from certain lands; it may even involve the curtailment of some international business interests; it will certainly involve the realignment of alliances and allies. Strategies seemingly based on sound military imperatives will have to be revised: even pre-emptive war, which seeks to punish people not for what they have done but what they might do, is seen by some to violate the common sense notion of justice that is basic to democratic societies. As Prime Minister Blair concludes in his August speech: 'Unless we reappraise our strategy, unless we revitalize the broader global agenda on poverty, climate change, trade, and in respect of the Middle East, bend every sinew of our will to making peace between Israel and Palestine, we will not win. And this is a battle we must win.'¹⁶ At the moment, it is the sociological teachings of Sayyid Qutb¹⁷ rather than the statements of

Tony Blair that are having the greater influence on the world stage. ■

NOTES

- 1 Tony Blair, *Speech to World Affairs Council, Los Angeles, 1 August 2006*.
- 2 Qutb was killed in 1966. Another Egyptian, Ayman al-Zawahiri (currently the deputy leader of Al-Qa'ida), espouses many of Qutb's beliefs. In a videotaped message released after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in August 2006, he has said that 'all the world is a battlefield open in front of us'. Andrew McGregor, 'Al-Qa'eda's Egyptian Prophet: Sayyid Qutb and the War On Jahiliya', *Global Terrorism Analysis, Terrorism Monitor* (Vol. 1, No. 3, October 2003). <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=23409>
- 3 For an analysis of current Muslim attitudes, see Pew Global Attitudes Project, 'The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other.' <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=253>
- 4 NOP (August 2006) and Populus (June 2006) respectively.
- 5 William Durodie, 'Sociological Aspects of Risk and Resilience in Response to Acts of Terrorism', *World Defence Systems* (Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 2004).
- 6 Tony Blair, *op. cit.*
- 7 George Bush, *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, Washington DC, 20 September 2001*.
- 8 Matthew Parris, 'Don't look in the rubble for answers – look at yourself', *The Times*, 22 November 2003.
- 9 Francis Fukuyama, *After the neo-cons: America at the crossroads* (London: Profile Books, 2006).
- 10 The Metropolitan Police believe that there are around 1,200 Islamist terrorists hiding in British suburbs.
- 11 Bernard Lewis, *speaking to Die Welt*, 28 July 2004.
- 12 Anthony Browne, 'The Triumph of the East', *The Spectator*, 25 July 2004. <http://www.spectator.co.uk/archive/features/12424/the-triumph-of-the-east.html>
- 13 Mark Silverberg, 'The Coming of Eurabia', <http://marksilverberg.com/index.php?article=1838>
- 14 Tony Blair, *op. cit.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 See also Luke Loboda, 'The Thoughts of Sayyid Qutb: Radical Islam's Philosophical Foundations, 2004', <http://www.ashbrook.org/publicat/thesis/loboda/home.html>