

RELIGION, RADICALISM AND TERRORISM

23rd Asia-Pacific Roundtable

Sheraton Imperial Kuala Lumpur Hotel

2 June 2009, 1715-1830

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At the height of the Mumbai siege last November, one of the perpetrators, Fahad Ullah, used the mobile phone of one of the victims to call India TV and conducted a live interview with two journalists there.

About a minute into their four minute conversation, the two journalists, one male, one female, asked him in turn 'What are your demands?'. At this point Fahad Ullah answered 'Wait one minute' and he was heard consulting with someone else as to their demands.

I find this episode to be one of the most insightful vignettes there is into the nature of contemporary terrorism.

It may well be that all of the perpetrators were from Pakistan originally. They may well have been trained there and even have been controlled by someone there.

But even if they were naïve canon-fodder themselves, still, to this day, over six months since the attack, no-one has come forward to claim responsibility for it, or to identify their demands and purposes.

If, as we have consistently been told since 9/11, most of the terrorist incidents we see around the world today are part of some resurgent Islamist conspiracy, then the leaders of this particular atrocity appear to have been somewhat backward about coming forward and highlighting their cause.

Maybe that is because they do not have one? They would certainly not be the first in this position, as what I find most striking about terrorism today is its evident absence of purpose or coherent aims, worldwide.

When I was young, growing up in London, everybody knew exactly what the Provisional IRA wanted. They claimed responsibility for their attacks and never ceased to remind people as to what these were for.

They also understood terrorism to be merely a tactic set within a broader struggle to win hearts and minds politically, within their own communities and beyond. Terror, for them, was a means to achieving this wider political end.

Today, we witness a form of terror that is simply the end in itself. It seeks to serve no greater purpose, and those perpetrating it are quite clearly not attempting to articulate any political arguments to cohere a constituency.

It is precisely this failure to spell out their purpose that has allowed all-manner of pundits, commentators and self-appointed experts to fill the vacuum these nihilist criminals leave behind with their own pet prejudices about what this is all for.

Foremost amongst these has been an assumed association with Islam. Of course, this is sometimes facilitated by the fact that the perpetrators claim this link too. But should we take their claims at face-value?

The American analyst Marc Sageman, and others, have examined how it is that self-styled extremists today are not poor or poorly educated, and neither are they political or particularly pious. They are often born and educated in the West, or at least appear to have become more radical through spending time there.

Few come from the parts of the world they claim to be acting on behalf of. They would have trouble identifying places in the Middle-East given a map. Some met in gymnasiums, rather than mosques and were well-integrated into their local communities, if somewhat self-distancing from them.

Above-all, it would seem, that far from being vulnerable and recruited through the inflammatory rhetoric of a radical mullah, it is they who go in search of a group to join, even rejecting those they see as not being serious enough.

Two of the London bombers, Mohammad Sidique Khan and Shezad Tanweer, appear to have visited Pakistan prior to the 7 July 2005 bombings. But these visits, possibly to pick-up tips and some kind of blessing, almost certainly came after their decision to act in the first place. In other words, they were already angry and knew what they wanted to do, and then sought some kind of credibility by going to Pakistan.

They used the language of Jihad and conflict with the West as an excuse to dissimulate their rage against the modern world that they felt so alien from. In other words, Islam, for them at least, was more a motif than a motive. It was the badge of honour they sought to wear, and others do too, that represents many of those who reject the way the world is today.

An academic in London describes Islam as 'the new Rock 'n Roll'. When our parents were young, Rock and Roll music was what distinguished them from, and most annoyed, their parents. Maybe, a few years ago in the West, announcing to your parents that you were gay had that effect. Today, it would be to convert to Islam.

Few of these individuals need to have any Islamic background in the first place, although this does provide a ready-made narrative of victimhood and oppression, as well as an excuse for failure and rage, amongst Muslims.

It is quite clear, particularly in the West, that many young Muslim girls who now wear the headscarf, come from families where their mother never did. It is therefore more a statement about social distancing than anything else.

When asked on British television whether wearing a headscarf was some kind of fashion statement, a young Muslim woman, who had previously identified her dislike and rejection of all things Western, retorted 'It's about me and my identity. And I don't like men looking at me'.

This reflects a remarkable confusion. Here was a young woman rejecting the West, using the language of Western identity politics and feminism to do so. Other similar confusions abound.

At the trial of those in England caught as part of Operation Crevice, it transpired that the conspirators, who had acquired a large volume of ammonium-nitrate fertilizer, were hoping to poison the beer of football fans, attack a large shopping mall and blow up what they described as 'all those slags dancing around' in nightclubs.

This list of targets is not to be found in the Koran, but it does appear to reflect the exaggerated concerns of contemporary commentators and politicians as to the possible breakdown of our social fabric. They too caricature the behaviour of drunken football fans, suggest that we have become shallow shop-aholic consumers and, at the more conservative end of the spectrum, worry about the antics of young women in nightclubs.

So maybe the self-styled Jihadists have been listening to us a bit too much? Even Osama bin Laden advises White House officials in his writings to read the journalist Robert Fisk rather than, as one might have supposed, the Koran.

He used to focus his rage against Saudi Arabia. After 9/11 when Western journalists presumed it was all about Palestine, he shifted his rantings to that. More recently he has shifted his anger to Iraq and even the refusal of the US administration to sign up to the Kyoto Treaty. This shows quite how parasitic such individuals are on debates that are happening in the West, between Western politicians, academics and commentators.

Maybe it is our own caricature of ourselves that is the problem? Presumably, if we suggest that we are degenerate, decadent, corrupt, confused and spineless, then there will be some, somewhere, who will act upon it?

It may be uncomfortable or unpalatable for some to recall, but when the Twin Towers went down in New York there were quite a few in the West who suggested that America 'deserved it'.

The day after 9/11, in the supposedly liberal British broadsheet newspaper, The Guardian, the journalist Seamus Milne penned an opinion piece about Americans entitled 'They don't know why they are hated'.

Maybe, when Michael Moore's 'Stupid White Men' became a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic, selling over 300,000 copies in the UK in its first year of publication alone, a few bright minds in the security agencies should have woken up to the extent to which, as a society, we appear to hate ourselves.

I used to note, when I was speaking at conferences in the UK six or more years ago that, if I wanted to find people who were anti-American, anti-Western, anti-modern, anti-progress or anti-science, then I really did not need to go and look for them in the Middle-East. There were plenty in London, some even teaching at our Universities there.

This cultural self-loathing is quite palpable. More recent episodes include respected scientists who have argued that influenza might save the planet from the plague that they describe as humanity, or an environmental columnist who describes flying as equivalent to child abuse, inasmuch as it damages the planet.

With friends like these, who needs enemies? More importantly, this cultural confusion is likely to manifest itself in a myriad of ways. In an age marked by an absence of meaning and the decline of the old collectivities of family, religion and politics to belong to and derive identity from, it is not surprising that all of our young people, and some not so young too, are searching for something to provide purpose to their lives.

Fortunately, only a few will find this in something as destructive as supposed jihadist terrorism. Most will find some positive experience to draw from through their work. Others, whose employment may be less stimulating, pursue all-manner of hobbies, some more obscure than others. At the more problematic end of the spectrum, a growing number of individuals define themselves through some, often self-determined illness identity, such as chronic fatigue, stress and increasingly many others.

There are also some notable parallels between today's nihilist extremist terrorists and mass high-school killers, in the US and elsewhere. Notably, the Finnish student Pekka-Eric Auvinen, who committed such an atrocity nearly two years ago, was motivated by the writings of a deep-green Finnish ecologist called Pentti Linkola, who thinks that there are too many people on earth. Auvinen thought that he was just doing his bit to save the planet.

The key point here is that instead of worrying about what it is that supposedly 'radicalises' people, and then seeking to undermine their narrative, we would be far better off focusing on, and developing, a positive narrative of our own.

Why are some people susceptible to the suggestions of supposedly radical Islam? What is it about these ideas that resonate with them? The answer does not lie in the power and magnetism of the ideas and individuals themselves, but rather in the absence of mainstream alternatives to believe in, that we should be providing them with.

Many are looking for a system of belief, or some structure, rules and purpose, through which to imbue their lives with meaning. It is when we fail to provide this that these individuals look elsewhere, including in distorted versions of religious faiths.

By worrying that they may become 'extremists', we then also reveal our own inner moral bankruptcy, as it appears that we are saying 'you can believe anything you like, just don't believe it too much'. It is when we have lost faith in our own, secular project, that those who are more passionate and quite often more articulate than ourselves, also appear more principled.

The presumption that there is a necessary link between religion, radicalism and terrorism is just that – a presumption. The evidence is somewhat more vague.

Notably, in a report published by the British think-tank, Policy Exchange, a few years ago, called 'Living Apart Together' and which examined the experience of young Muslims in Britain, the authors were the first to ask ordinary young Britons the same questions as so many had been asking of Muslims since 9/11.

To the question 'Do you admire organizations like Al-Qaeda that are prepared to fight against the West?', 7% of Muslims answered in the affirmative. This may seem a lot, but one should also be circumspect of, particularly young, people displaying a degree of bravado. More significantly however, when the same question was asked of the general population, 3% answered 'yes' and, as the authors of the report point out, 3% of 60 million British people is a lot more than 7% of 2 million British Muslims.

Maybe then, it is high-time we addressed some of these wider social elements to the radical nihilist equation? Treating Muslims differently, as many have done since 9/11, not only perpetuates a difference that need not be so significant, but it also continues to fail to address the need for us to develop a narrative of our own as to the kind of society we want to live in, with which we might finally be able to win the hearts and minds of the majority, who really matter, as well as of the few, who might otherwise look elsewhere for a system of meaning.

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21 May 2009