

After the London Bombings: Meeting the Challenge of Young Muslims and Extremism

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Brief Analysis

Although the U.S. and British governments have offered gestures of mutual diplomatic support and apparent political agreement in the aftermath of the July 7 terrorist bombings in London, such efforts mask the wide differences between their approaches to the increasing threat of al-Qaeda terrorism. On July 15, President George W. Bush, speaking in North Carolina about the bombings, stated, "The killers . . . did not care about their religion. . . . These people will not be stopped by negotiations. . . . There is only one course of action. We will take the fight to the enemy, and we will stay in this fight until this enemy is defeated." The next day, Prime Minister Tony Blair, stated, "The greatest danger is that we fail to face up to the nature of the threat we are dealing with. . . . [N]o sane person would negotiate. . . . It cannot be beaten except by confronting it, symptoms and causes, head-on. Without compromise and without delusion." The similarity in language was probably intentional. Yet, Washington's apparent preference for military force contrasts with Blair's categorization of Britain's strategy: "In the end, it is the power of argument, debate, true religious faith, and true legitimate politics that will defeat this threat."

Differences in Word and Deed

Since July 7, the British government has outlined a four-part plan proposing new antiterror laws aimed at curbing incitement. Religious extremists, particularly preachers in mosques, will be prevented from entering the country, while radical imams already in Britain could face deportation. Britain will also look for an opt-out from certain European human rights laws, allowing it to deport foreigners who have been granted residence but whose activities alarm the police and security services. London will also seek increased international cooperation on persuading countries not to mistreat citizens deported from Britain, monitoring email and cell phone use, and combating terrorist financing.

Yet, differences are already emerging between Britain's actual implementation of such plans and U.S. policy. For example, one of London's avowed criteria for banning religious extremists is whether the individuals in question are banned by the U.S. government, with the British Home Secretary rendering final judgment on specific cases. Despite this declared policy, Britain permitted Tariq Ramadan, an Islamist professor whose U.S. entry visa was revoked in 2004, to speak at a London conference this week. His trip was paid for by the British police, who consider him a

moderating force. Britain is also reportedly expected to permit Yusuf al-Qaradawi -- a Muslim cleric who defends suicide bombings and who was banned from the United States after the September 11 attacks -- to attend a conference in September if he chooses to accept the organizers' invitation. He previously visited London in 2004 as a guest of Mayor Ken Livingstone, despite protests from Jewish and other groups who were well aware of his record (e.g., in 2003, al-Qaradawi reportedly stated, "Oh God, destroy the usurper Jews, the vile crusaders, and infidels").

Other key differences between the British and U.S. approaches have also become clear. For example, the British government continues to permit charitable donations to Hamas, drawing a distinction between the group's social and military activities. Moreover, Britain may yet have much to learn from the United States regarding the tracking of foreign students; British police are currently investigating an Egyptian biochemistry student linked to the apartment in which the July 7 bombs were reportedly made.

Terrorism As a Social Problem?

In the years following the September 11 attacks, Britain became infamous for incubating Islamist militants, whether from abroad or within its large indigenous Muslim community. Both the "shoe bomber" Richard Reid and September 11 conspirator Zacarias Moussaoui reportedly attended sermons at London mosques. Ahmed Omar Said al-Sheikh, convicted of kidnapping and murdering Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl in Pakistan, previously studied at the London School of Economics. In April 2003, two British Muslims, Asif Hanif and Omar Sharif, carried out a suicide bombing at a Tel Aviv bar. In April 2005, Britain sentenced another would-be shoe bomber, Saajid Badat, to a lengthy prison term. Also in April, Algerian Kamel Bourgass, accused of attempting to manufacture ricin poison in London, was sentenced to life in prison for killing a police officer during a raid on his apartment.

The British government did not appear to appreciate the danger of this trend until early 2004, when the cabinet held an intensive discussion about terrorism. According to a leaked letter written by Britain's top civil servant, who also serves as cabinet secretary, the ministers recognized the need "to encourage moderate Muslim opinion" and asserted that "a sense of isolation and disaffection within parts of the Muslim community is leading to acts of terrorism." The most disaffected would, the letter noted, be attracted to "Al Qaeda and its off-shoots." A new counterterrorism strategy (codenamed "Contest") emerged from the discussion, the first "pillar" of which reportedly focused on prevention. Its aim was to prevent terrorism by tackling its underlying causes. Accordingly, the cabinet resolved "to work together to resolve regional conflicts, to support moderate Islam and reform, and to diminish support for terrorists by influencing relevant social and economic issues."

Questionable Assumptions

The assumptions behind British government thinking on the problem of Islamic extremism were revealed in a document titled *Young Muslims and Extremism*, a May 2004 draft of which was leaked to a British newspaper and **published on the internet (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-1688261,00.html>)**. The draft report was written jointly by officials from the British Foreign Office and Home Office (the equivalent functions in the U.S. government fall under the Departments of State, Justice, and Homeland Security). Its cover letter noted that "British Muslims who are at most risk of being drawn into extremism and terrorism fall into two groups: (a) well-educated, with degrees or technical/professional qualifications, typically targeted by extremist recruiters and organizations circulating on campuses; (b) under-achievers with few or no qualifications, and often a non-terrorist criminal background . . . sometimes drawn to mosques where they may be targeted by extremist preachers and in other cases radicalized or converted whilst in prison." The report also noted that British Muslims are the country's most deprived group, educationally and economically.

Accordingly, most of the report's recommendations concentrated on bolstering moderate Muslims rather than combating radicals. The report justified this strategy with a decidedly selective reading of various surveys of Muslim

opinion conducted in recent years. For example, the report stated that "the great majority of British Muslims (up to 85%) regarded terrorist attacks on western targets, including the 9/11 attacks, as unjustified." Yet, it failed to mention that 67 percent of respondents in a November 2001 poll it cited believed that blaming Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda for the September 11 attacks was also unjustified. Moreover, the report's contention that a majority of "young Muslims in 2001 believed that Islam prohibited or discouraged such attacks" was uncorroborated by any of the cited surveys. The report also implied, by omission, that suicide attacks in Israel are a different phenomenon.

Prime Minister Blair's overall stance is to show "the moderate and true voice of Islam," a formulation he has repeated several times. Today, he welcomed Muslim leaders to his Downing Street office. The group included individuals who yesterday issued a statement and a fatwa, both of which quoted from the Quran as follows: "Whoever kills a human being, then it is as though he has killed all mankind; and whoever saves a human life, it is as though he had saved all mankind." Yet, the full quote (from sura 5, verse 32) actually begins, "Whoever kills a human being, unless it be a person guilty of manslaughter or of spreading disorder in the land, then it is as though etc." The missing phrases have often been used to theologically justify suicide bombings; this discrepancy has yet to be reported. Meanwhile, British police assert that as many as 3,000 al-Qaeda trainees already reside in Britain.

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