

A narrative of our own

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At the height of the Mumbai siege in November 2008, 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 asked him in turn 'What are your demands?' At this point Fahad Ullah answered 'Wait one minute' and was heard consulting with someone else as to their demands.

This episode is 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 controlled by someone there. But even if they were naïve cannon-fodder themselves, still, to this day no-one has come forward to claim responsibility for it.

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 highlighting their cause. Maybe that is because they do not have one?

A generation ago in the UK 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. 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 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 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.

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Few come from the parts of the world they claim to be acting on behalf of. Some met in gymnasiums, rather than mosques and were well-integrated into their local communities.

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.

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 almost certainly came after their decision to act in the first place. In other words, they already 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.

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.

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. They too caricature the behaviour of drunken football fans, shallow shop-aholics and, at the more conservative end of the spectrum, 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 he shifted his rantings to Palestine, then Iraq and latterly 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, 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’.

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Anyone wanting to find anti-American, anti-Western, anti-modern, or anti-progress sentiments does not need to go looking for these somewhere in the Middle-East. Such views are abundant across the UK. This cultural self-loathing is quite palpable. More recent episodes include scientists who argue that influenza might save the planet from the plague of humanity, or an environmental columnist who describes flying as equivalent to child abuse.

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 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.

But 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.

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, or poverty and injustice, with radicalism and terrorism is just that – a presumption. The evidence is far from clear.

Notably, in a report published by the British think-tank, Policy Exchange called ‘Living Apart Together’, 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. 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.