Are terrorists on another planet?

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The latest audiotape from Osama bin Laden raises again the question of who al-Qaeda represents. Is the 'offer' of a 'truce' a message to take on board from someone who speaks for millions of people? Or does it express yearnings of an iconic but deluded figure whose fantasy of speaking and negotiating with peoples and states should not be taken seriously at face value? This question has its counterpart in our efforts to understand the relationships of the July bombers to their communities in Britain.

Sir Ian Blair warned last December of an intensifying threat from terrorist cells based in the UK. Understanding the development of these cells is therefore a security priority, and this is seen by many as requiring us to look closely at the depth of anger felt by many young people in Muslim communities. But do our current forms of terrorist threat have an intrinsic and necessary relationship with the communities from which the terrorists come and whose ultimate interests they purport to advance? Or are the cells more akin to cults, marked by a fundamental ethical and emotional disengagement from all the people and realities of everyday life around them?

In some cases, where terrorist organisations are strong, relatively stable and relatively large, they may play significant if ad hoc roles in welfare provision or policing in their communities, as with the IRA and Hamas. In those situations, it is clear that there is a lot of active support in the community, and wider passive support or acquiescence, and that this support helps to sustain the scale and success of the terrorist strategy. The Al Qaida network, with its mobile, completely clandestine and time-limited groupings, is obviously in a different type of relationship to its 'host' community. Yet fears that cells can and do grow only in the fertile soil of culturally segregated and disaffected communities are still widespread. In the UK at present, the alienation of large sections of the Muslim community, especially young people, from British society as a whole, is often seen as an important, perhaps crucial, factor in generating the risk of further terrorist attacks. The precise relationship between terrorist cell or individual and the wider Muslim community may not always be clearly specified, but

there are general fears that parts of the community may tolerate, condone, collude with or otherwise increase the likelihood of the adoption by a very few individuals of active jihadist paths which lead to terror.

It is certainly plausible on common-sense grounds that widespread and profound bitterness may enable those individuals to feel that what they do or plan to do is justified, and that they have some tacit licence to proceed – if a clearly ambivalent one - from their own communities. Hence the prominence in current counter-terrorist strategies of engaging with the Muslim communities, and seeing action in and through them as a key to preventing malignant radicalisation. Both the Home Office and the police are very active on this front, for example through the police National Community Tension Team. The set of seven working groups of leading Muslims set up by the Home Office after 7/7 recently reported to it on various ways to 'prevent extremism together', and some of their recommendations seem likely to gather support, as well as provoking intense debate (and arguments about the representativeness of the groups) in the coming months.

There are also some more academic reasons, and some political ones, for seeing actions addressing Muslim populations as a whole, and actions within their communities, as fundamental to counter-terrorism. The study of group dynamics teaches us that marginal individuals are often expressing something for the whole group. And some psychological studies of terrorists appear to show that they are 'normal people', indistinguishable from their peers. Moreover, the political arguments of many across the political spectrum assume that Muslims have objective reasons to be aggrieved, and that grievance feeds extremism, even while a majority may continue to disavow terrorist strategies.

There is both a chill and a comfort to this approach. The chill comes from the disturbing thought that the 7/7 terrorists really were 'home-grown', or at least that the soil in which they grew as terrorists included spadefuls of today's Britain, whether one emphasises therein the inequalities and racism of the dominant society, or the inwardness and bitterness of Muslim sub-societies. The comfort is in the idea that a solution to the problem is within our reach: if we currently provide the environment necessary to succour terrorism, then we can also strive to change that environment,

and to remove or at least much reduce the chances of murderous militancy developing.

The approach may however be mistaken, in at least some respects. The previous, small occurrence of 'home-grown terrorism' in Britain – the Angry Brigade of the early 1970s - required no collusive or ambivalent cover from any substantial section of society. This would scarcely have been forthcoming in a then still politically and culturally quite conservative nation. Instead it erupted from a certain kind of revolutionary polemic directly igniting destructiveness in a few intense and secretive individuals. The 7/7 bombers similarly appear to have lived part of their time in a parallel universe to their families and friends. It may be that the sufficient condition for terrorism is the combination of inspirational sources with a handful of disturbed individuals. This of course does not fit the 'terrorists are regular guys' theory, but that theory anyway lacks common-sense plausibility. Some non-ideological mass murderers lived very normal lives outside of their murdering activities, but we would not be led to conclude that they were psychologically average.

So perhaps the problem is better stated in terms of a fundamental disconnection between terrorists and their societies, rather than in terms of a basic connection or even continuity between them and their communities. They are split off from their immediate material and emotional communities as well as from the more distant and imagined general 'society'. Only by understanding them as being psychologically in a parallel universe, or - to use another telling everyday metaphor - on a different planet, can we make sense of their readiness indiscriminately to annihilate others around them in their own society.

Yet terrorists (home-grown, emigre or peripatetic) are members of something, whether that is a para-military organisation, a defined movement or an elusive 'network'. This is one thing that differentiates them from non-ideological (though equally focussed and other-worldly) killers such as Shipman and Nilsen. A recent article by the German sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina[1] has thrown valuable light on how the loose, shifting, complex structure of Al Qaeda has been able to generate such

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[1] 'Complex global microstructures: the new terrorist societies', in *Theory, Culture and Society* 22(5), 213-234, 2005.

tightly organised, committed and disproportionately effective action by small cells. These are held together, and linked with strong psychological bonds to the rest of the ill-defined network, by a transcendent sense of time and purpose. To survive in a cell, and to get its promised benefit of salvation (as in, for example, a sense of fullness for an empty self, or an experience of dramatic strength for the inwardly humiliated), you have to buy totally into the transcendence of quotidian society. Knorr Cetina writes of the '"futural" mode of living', in which the future triumph of jihad (and possibly its entwinement with personal death) is the vertex of a transcendent temporality. The key to entering this mode is to be found in the media artefacts of texts, images, commentary and speeches which serve as a corpus of mobilising material, and which hold together the global affective community of terrorist jihadists. Elsewhere, especially in the Middle East, that community may be represented by people who are far more really embedded in their communities of origin. And of course at a global level, there are deep - if complex - links between Islamist terrorism and some components of geo-political reality, in the status of Muslims as oppressed people in a number of key conflicts. That does not however mean that our 'home grown' or imported terrorists are living in empathic contact with their own part of geo-political reality, namely Britain.

Nonetheless, despite the root of contemporary UK terrorism in a global flow of transcendent meaning, there is still a crucial value in engagement with the communities in which terrorists live, even if they 'live' there in body alone. That value is of course to pragmatic counter-terrorism intelligence efforts, and lies in the information about oddities and goings-on which a close and reasonably trusting engagement may bring. But alongside this practical strategy, a deeper and clearer analysis of the relationship between (potential) terrorists and their communities is needed, since our understanding of this relationship will influence how counter-terrorist objectives shape policing. This aspect of the relations between the state and citizens of Muslim background is likely to be one of the key issues in determining social cohesion in Britain in the coming years. It will certainly influence how many Muslims see the British state (their state). How we see the genesis of home-grown terrorism will also influence how non-Muslims see Muslims. Downplaying the ideas that there is collusion with or tolerance of terror amongst Muslim communities may be helpful (though whatever levels of support there may be here for suicide bombers

in Palestine and Iraq limits the overall truthfulness of this strategy). It would not release Muslim leaders from the responsibility of making the most emphatic denunciations of terrorism, as long as attacks continue to be dressed in Islamist language, but it would enable all of us to focus more effectively on the twin drivers of attacks in niche jihadist global media outputs and in the formation of small groups based on visions of the cataclysmic road to the sublime.