

The terror within: Responding to London's bombings

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After 9/11 Americans asked: Why do they hate us?—they being shadowy extremists from the Middle East. After the terrorist bombings of 7/7 in London, Britons pondered the enemy within: How could middle-class, second-generation British Muslims do this to their fellow citizens? The dark questions of our time—What makes someone become a terrorist, and what can be done to stop it?—have neighborly immediacy, especially for Muslims in the United Kingdom.

Some say that the task of stopping terrorism lies mostly on the shoulders of the Muslim community itself. It must denounce violent ideologies and turn young radicals away from killing in the name of Allah. Many Muslims would agree. In fact, the bombing appears to have prompted a notable amount of self-criticism among British Muslims. For example, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee in the UK points to the “failure of British mosques to teach their congregations the importance of integration and political participation.” Imams often cannot speak English, the MPACUK complains, and they don’t understand the problems young Muslims face in a secular society.

Still, even the most forceful efforts by moderate Muslims to critique the ideology of radical Islam will probably not affect the alienated youth who are attracted by its very extremism—attracted, that is, by the fact that it offers a definitive opposition to democratic “integration.” At least it will take years for such efforts to bear fruit.

Others insist that stopping terrorism depends on removing underlying causes of Muslims’ grievance: the oppression of Muslims, beginning with those in Palestine, at the hands of the West. It is to Prime Minister Tony Blair’s credit that he understands this dimension of the problem, and as a result has a sense of urgency about addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (an urgency not evidenced by the U.S.). It was Blair who, in the aftermath of the bombing, orchestrated a \$3 billion aid package from the G8 countries to the Palestinian Authority to improve living

standards.

Still, it would be naïve to think that progress toward a two-state solution in Israel-Palestine, not to mention toward a peaceful and stable Iraq, will by itself dismantle terrorism. Terrorism seems to be fueled by something more than geopolitical logic. That much has been evident in the Netherlands, where terrorists have targeted public figures and public facilities not because the country has any heft in world affairs but simply because it is a convenient symbol of Western decadence.

The roots of terrorism remain deep, various, intertwined and difficult to generalize about. Each terrorist turns out to have his own unpredictable story, and often a crucial factor is an accidental encounter with a terrorist mentor. In the age of the Internet, such encounters can happen anywhere.

Four years after 9/11, we have more questions than answers regarding terrorism and how to stop it. This much, however, should be evident: the regular talk by U.S. leaders of a “war on terrorism” is hugely misleading. Capturing terrorist leaders, destroying training camps, overthrowing the rogue states that harbor terrorists—such traditional warlike actions proved only marginally useful. A twilight struggle awaits, and it will involve a lot more soul-searching, in local mosques and in the highest political offices.