Chapter 8 – RE-VISITING 7/7, GRIEVANCE AND SHAME

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For the conspirators who killed fifty two London commuters on 7 July 2005 'suicide bombing' was a tactical choice informed by the guiding strategy of an influential terrorist movement, al Qaeda. In the suicide bombers' post-dated videos there is clear evidence that they drew inspiration from Osama bin Laden's propaganda statements claiming legitimacy for the tactic. 7/7 would be justified by the men who carried it out in exactly the same way bin Laden rationalised 9/11 and 3/11:

> What happened in September 11 [New York / Washington] and March 11 [Madrid] is your own merchandise coming back to you. We hereby advise you … that your definition of us and of our actions as terrorism is nothing but a definition of yourselves by yourselves, since our reaction is of the same kind as your act. Our actions are a reaction to yours, which are destruction and killing of our people as is happening in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine … It suffices to see the event that shocked the world – the killing of the wheelchair-bound old man Ahmad Yassin – Allah's mercy upon him – and we pledge to Allah to avenge [his murder] on America, Allah willing ... [1].

Legitimacy here is premised on reciprocity. Political grievance and the shame of defeat are assuaged in an act of reciprocal violence:

> By what measure of kindness are your killed considered innocents while ours are considered worthless? By what school [of thought] is your blood considered blood while our blood is water? … Therefore, it is [only] just to respond in kind, and the one who started it is more to blame … [1].

Moreover, in the decade preceding 7/7 bin Laden's brand of propaganda had become common coinage for a number of Muslims throughout the UK. Most notably Abu Hamza, Abu Qatada and Abdullah el Faisal, became prominent local propagandists who effectively pre-figured the al Qaeda message. Significantly, Jamal Lindsey, one of the 7/7 suicide bombers first became enamored of this world-view when he attended talks by Abullah el Faisal. More crucially, to the extent that some reliable evidence has subsequently emerged it appears the bombers themselves may have been trained for this particular task by experienced al Qaeda operatives. In contrast, in other al Qaeda inspired terrorist conspiracies in the UK would-be suicide bombers appear to have failed in their tasks because of a lack of training the 7/7 bombers received. More clearly, the choice to carry out a 'suicide' attack meant that Mohammad Siddique Khan, Shezad Tanweer, Jamal Lindsey and Hasib Hussain, the perpetrators of 7/7, demonstrated a willingness to die along with their victims. For the victims themselves the chosen method of detonating a bomb had exactly the same impact on them as terrorist bombs that killed and injured other London commuters at other times, planted by members of the Provisional IRA who planned instead to escape alive. On reflection it may be that the two terrorist methods have more in common than just the identical impact on innocent victims. Certainly, there is a small but growing body of literature that acknowledges the risk of death all terrorists face when manufacturing or planting bombs [2],[3].

The point of interest for the authors of this chapter is that grievance and shame appear to be key motivational factors for both Provisional IRA and al Qaeda terrorists who have attacked London commuters with bombs at different times and in respect of campaigns that are otherwise conceptualized as belonging to separate typologies – most typically 'radical nationalism' (in the case of the Provisional IRA) and 'religious and quasi-religious extremism' (in the case of al Qaeda) [4].

It will not, however, be possible to do more than outline the possibility that grievance and shame were key factors in the mindsets of two distinct terrorist movements who merely chose to attack commuters in the

same city. The government's refusal to hold any authoritative enquiry into 7/7 has led to uncertainty and confusion about the background to the attacks. In addition, an unintended outcome of the government's position has been an alarming growth of 'conspiracy theories' gaining root in British Muslim communities. Instead of the clarity and transparency Lord Scarman and Lord Macpherson brought to bear on events of equal concern to minority communities, in respect of 7/7 Muslim communities have been forced to rely instead on government narratives that carry no credibility [5],[6]. Typically, conspiracy theories consist of variations on the themes of false evidence (e.g., the invalidity of CCTV evidence of the 7/7 bombers at Luton railway station) and a hidden State hand (e.g., a covert US or Israeli action). Early investigative accounts of 7/7 were similarly dismissive of government credibility but perhaps overly focused on the Iraq War as a single explanatory cause (see for example Rai, M., 2006. 7/7 *The London Bombings Islam and The Iraq War*. London: Pluto Press). In contrast this chapter seeks to present bottom-up community and practitioner perspectives that might have been adduced in evidence if ever a public, judicial enquiry had been held.

In the first instance it is reasonable to assume that a judge enquiring into the causes of 7/7 would have interrogated the veracity and meaning of the video messages left by the perpetrators. Muslim community witnesses might have been called to comment on them. Indeed, on the evidence of community interviews conducted by the authors it is fair to suggest that the judge would have been encouraged to understand that the frustrations about a lack of any effective response to state violence against Muslims – as enunciated by the bombers – was commonplace:

> Oh Muslims of Britain – you day in day out on your TV sets watching and hearing about the oppression of the Muslims. From the east to the west yet you turn a blind eye as if you never heard anything or as if it does not concern you. You have preferred the duniya (world) to Allah and his messenger (PBUH) and to the hereafter... (Tanveer).

A judge, we venture to suggest, might have come to appreciate that the legitimacy of 7/7, in the eyes of the conspirators, would have turned on their willingness to accept that the tactic was halal (lawful) in the context of their religious understanding. Khan, of course, argues that it is halal, ridiculing Muslim scholars who say it is haram as cowards.

In the same way it is reasonable to suggest that an experienced High Court judge would have been willing to hear evidence from counter-terrorism practitioners who dissented from prevailing 'new terrorism' and 'war on terror' paradigms that dismissed experience of Provisional IRA terrorism as irrelevant [7]. Instead the judge would have been reminded that a tough government response to terrorist prisoners' demands for political status was turned into a successful recruitment strategy by the Provisional IRA and that one of al Qaeda's aims was that Mohammed Sadiqqi Khan, the eldest 7/7 bomber, should achieve the same heroic status as Bobby Sands and for the same purpose. That, counter-terrorist practitioners would have argued, was the prime purpose of the video in which Khan explained the reasons for his pending terrorist enterprise [7].

Intriguingly, Khan's explanation both for taking part in terrorism and for taking his own life bears striking similarities to Bobby Sands' case. To demonstrate this it is helpful to compare extracts from Khan's video performance with extracts from Bobby Sands' prison diary – a record written in secret that had a subsequent major impact in elevating Sands' to heroic status for a generation of PIRA volunteers. Both terrorists, Khan and Sands, insist they are part of oppressed communities that have to resort to violence to oppose the overwhelming might and treachery of an inherently hostile neo-colonialist power. In Kahn's words: "Until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight." In Sands' words: "I am a casualty of a perennial war that is being fought between the oppressed Irish people and an alien, oppressive, unwanted regime that refuses to withdraw from our land." [8].

Both are self-consciously approaching death as a form of martyrdom so as to elevate themselves to an imagined moral high ground. In Khan's words: "I and thousands like me have forsaken everything for what we believe." In Sands' words: "I am a political prisoner because I believe and stand by the

God-given right of the Irish nation to sovereign independence, and the right of any Irishman or woman to assert this right in armed revolution. That is why I am incarcerated, naked and tortured." Interestingly, in the prison diary of one al Qaeda suspect there is a self-conscious alignment with Bobby Sands and other non-Muslim 'freedom fighters'.

Both Khan and Sands highlight the significance of their respective religious allegiances. In Khan's words: "It is very clear, brothers and sisters, that the path of jihad and the desire for martyrdom is embedded in the holy prophet and his beloved companions". In Sands' words (in the final days of his hunger strike):

> I can ignore the presence of food staring me straight in the face all the time. But I have this desire for brown wholemeal bread, butter, Dutch cheese and honey. Ha!! It is not damaging me, because, I think, 'Well, human food can never keep a man alive forever,' and I console myself with the fact that I'll get a great feed up above (if I'm worthy). But then I'm struck by this awful thought that they don't eat food up there. But if there's something better than brown wholemeal bread, cheese and honey, etc., then it can't be bad ... I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world. May God have mercy on my soul.

Both aspire to lead by example. In Khan's words: "Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood … By preparing ourselves for this kind of work, we are guaranteeing ourselves for paradise and gaining the pleasure of Allah.". In Sands' words, "I have considered all the arguments and tried every means to avoid what has become the unavoidable: it has been forced upon me and my comrades by four-and-a-half years of stark inhumanity.

Both are anxious to attack religious leaders in their own communities who fail to support the terrorist movement. In Khan's words, "… by turning our back on this work, we are guaranteeing ourselves humiliation and the anger of Allah. Jihad is an obligation on every single one of us, men and women". Whereas, he says, "our so-called scholars of today are content with their Toyotas and semi-detached houses" in their desire for integration. They are useless. They should stay at home and leave the job to real men – the true inheritors of the prophet". In Sands' words, "I was very annoyed last night when I heard Bishop Daly's statement (condemning the hunger-strike). Again he is applying his double set of moral standards. He seems to forget that the people who murdered those innocent Irishmen on Derry's Bloody Sunday are still as ever among us; and he knows perhaps better than anyone what has and is taking place in H-Block. He understands why men are being tortured here – the reason for criminalisation. What makes it so disgusting, I believe, is that he agrees with that underlying reason. Only once has he spoken out, of the beatings and inhumanity that are commonplace in H-Block". And both men, Khan and Sands, it follows, are self-evidently addressing themselves to supporters and would-be recruits rather than a wider public.

Which brief comparison between Khan and Sands is merely to suggest that the two men shared one key commitment that marks them off from the majority of their compatriots who shared their unremarkable attachment to anti-colonial politics – a willingness to become martyrs for their cause. Moreover, according to the same counter-terrorist evidence it may also be prudent not to place too much emphasis on the fact that only one of the two terrorists was a suicide bomber. On this evidence it may be important to recall that Sands belonged to a movement that was often indifferent to civilian deaths notwithstanding claims that it sought to limit this risk by way of coded warning calls to the police. Rather, it may be illuminating to reflect on what both movements have in common and perhaps the best way to conceptualise this convergence is in terms of what has been called 'asymmetric conflict' [4].

Thus, by adding notions of 'status asymmetry' and 'two-way asymmetry' to the conventional militarised typology of asymmetrical warfare Stepanova facilitates an enhanced understanding of asymmetry as it is actually experienced by state and especially non-state actors involved in conflict. Demonstrating a welcome grasp of the level of strategic thinking that guide all terrorist movements Stepanova incorporates terrorist ideology into a new account of asymmetrical conflict that is thereby competent to explain the tactical use of terrorism, not least the tactic of suicide bombing. A key step in her argument involves

recognising that asymmetry has a qualitative, as well as a quantitative dimension. Innovatively, she extends 'conflict in which extreme imbalance of military, economic and technological power' to include 'status inequality; specifically, the inequality between a non- or sub-state actor and a state' (Stepanova, 2008, 19). This is an important development of the concept of asymmetrical conflict because it facilitates an examination of what she calls the 'ideological disparity' separately and in conjunction with the 'structural disparity' between 'stronger' state and their 'weaker' non-state opponents. Stepanova also places emphasis on the increased tactical advantages non-state actors are likely to achieve over their state opponents the more they adopt structures that are dissimilar to those used by their opponents. Both the Provisional IRA and al Qaeda illustrate how a weaker party in asymmetrical conflict might adopt tactics so as to 'balance this asymmetry by making enemy civilians suffer as much as those in whose name the terrorist claims to act' [4].

At the very least a High Court judge might have been prepared to accept that the 7/7 suicide bombers were less alien to the Provisional IRA terrorists than the British Prime Minister insisted upon. Before 9/11 Tony Blair entered into negotiations with men who led a movement that had killed and maimed British civilians by terrorist bombs. He was determined to endorse a disproportionate and draconian response to 9/11 led by the US on the basis that the perpetrators were wholly beyond civilized politics and negotiation. In doing so he was at pains to distinguish them from the Provisional IRA. In consequence after 7/7 he was equally determined that the perpetrators' claim to have acted in response to the war on terror – most especially the invasion of Iraq – would be denied:

> But, coming to Britain is not a right. And even when people have come here, staying here carries with it a duty. That duty is to share and support the values that sustain the British way of life. Those that break that duty and try to incite hatred or engage in violence against our country and its people, have no place here. Over the coming months, in the courts, in parliament, in debate and engagement with all parts of our communities, we will work to turn those sentiments into reality. That is my duty as prime minister'.

Again, it is reasonable to suppose that a judge would at least have assessed the cogent argument made by al Qaeda propagandist in explanation of 7/7:

> Britain is the one who taught America how to kill and oppress Muslims in the first place. By drawing on experienced gained during hundreds of years of blood soaked colonial history. Lest we forget Britain is today besides prosecuting its occupation of Southern Iraq, the one heading the NATO occupation of Afghanistan and relieving the bloodied and bruised Americans in the south and east of the country. We haven't mentioned the fact that these actions of the Americans and the British are prohibited by the same international law treaties which they hypocritically claim to uphold and protect. Which they impose on others even as they themselves violate them with impunity.

In fairness to the Blair government there is no doubt that it heard from some critical Muslim voices (for example Iniyat Bunglawala representing the Muslim Council of Britain) in the immediate aftermath of 7/7. Voices prepared to explain how widespread community anger at Britain's role in the war on terror was providing propaganda and recruitment success for al Qaeda in Britain of the kind delivered by Adam Gadahn:

> What I am saying that is that when we bomb their cities and civilians as they bomb ours. Or destroyed their infrastructure or transportation like they did ours. Or kidnapped their non-combatants like they kidnapped ours. No sane Muslim should shed tears for them. They should blame no one but themselves because they are the ones who started this dirty war. They are the ones who will end it. By ending their aggression against Islam and Muslims. By pulling out of our region. By keeping their hand out of our affairs. Until they do that neither Forest Gate style police raids. Neither Belmarsh or Guantanamo cells nor the mosque or Imams advisory counsel will be able to prevent the Muslims exacting revenge on behalf of their persecuted brothers and sisters.

However, it seems reasonable to suppose that a High Court judge following in the footsteps of Lord Scarman and Lord Macpherson would have given more weight to critical community voices prepared to deliver messages that challenged the government's narrative. More crucially a public enquiry would have been bound to listen to community voices that were excluded from the government's post 7/7 community forum. Ironically, while the community figures invited to meet with the Home Office after 7/7 had no first-hand experience of al Qaeda activity in the UK, two minority sections of the community, Salafis and Islamists, had an abundance of valuable experience that spoke directly to the problem [7],[9]. For example, from Salafis in Brixton (an area of prime importance to Lord Scarman and Lord Macpherson) a judge would have heard how Salafis had been challenging the pernicious influence of extremists they called 'takfiris' in their communities for the best part of a decade. Evidence would have emerged of their work with al Qaeda operatives Abdul Raheem (otherwise shoe-bomber Richard Reid), Zacarius Moussaoui (convicted in relation to 9/11) and their challenge to the men who introduced 'takfiri' ideas to British Muslim youth – most notably Abu Hamza, Abu Qatada and Abdullah el Faisal. Similarly Islamists in Finsbury Park had first had experience of how they had successfully challenged Abu Hamza's violent supporters that would have been crucial to any full understanding of the problem and the best remedies to tackle it.

Evidence would have emerged describing how Osama bin Laden's powerful propaganda messages had already provided fuel for local events in Britain such as Abu Hamza's meeting at the Finsbury Park Mosque on the first anniversary of 9/11 which was provocatively billed, 'a towering day in history'. While this event alerted the wider community to the activities of Abu Hamza and like-minded extremists the fact is that Abu Hamza (along with Abdullah el Faisal and Abu Qatada) had by then assiduously cultivated small but strong UK followings over a long period of time, throughout much of the 1990s. One of their great attributes as leaders was to help young Muslims with a wide range of welfare issues. Very often new converts to Islam no less than Muslims newly arrived in London would need help with religious practice, diet, housing, benefits, relationships, employment and many other matters upon which their new leaders were adept at providing practical help often at times and in places where more conventional religious leaderships might be found lacking. Whereas many mainstream Muslim leaders appeared remote and detached the three London-based extremists were approachable, demonstrative and in touch with street issues. For instance, many firsthand accounts pay tribute to Abu Hamza's and Abdullah el Faisal's skills in helping young Muslim's move away from drug and alcohol use (and related crime) and into strict religious observance. Which is not to overlook a sinister, instrumental purpose but rather to acknowledge the calibre of their inter personal and leadership skills when dealing with young people.

In addition, Abu Hamza skillfully used a close circle of loyal followers to act as intermediaries and conduits for communication with his wider following. A first floor office at the Finsbury Park Mosque also served as a headquarters for his regime and a place to hold interviews. Many Muslim newcomers to the UK (especially from Algeria) knew that Finsbury Park Mosque would be a good place to seek help and shelter immediately upon arrival. Similarly Abu Qatada established a regular presence at a youth club (the Four Feathers) near Baker Street and the Regent Park Mosque (officially the London Central Mosque). His lack of fluent English was more than compensated by his reputation as a senior scholar and the willingness of loyal supporters to translate his teachings for eager audiences. At different times Abdullah el Faisal established strong community bases in Willesden, Edmonton and Brixton. All three, however, were mobile and travelled regularly to Muslim communities around the UK. One interviewee recalls attending an event in Luton in 1996 when Abu Hamza called on his audience to support the blind Egyptian Muslim scholar Omar Abdel Rahman (referred to as Sheikh Omar) who was then standing trial for seditious conspiracy in the USA arising from investigations into the first terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in 1993:

> Abu Hamza made it clear that he knew Sheikh Omar and that they had spent time together during one of the Sheikh's visits to London. Typically, Hamza accused the US of framing Sheikh Omar while at the same praising the attack on the World Trade Centre as a brave and just act.

This is just a small sample of the kind of evidence an experienced High Court judge might have heard in a public enquiry into the background and the causes of 7/7. In Bradford we have spoken to Salafis and Islamists who have felt too threatened as members of a 'suspect community' to liaise with police or government after 7/7. Given Lord Macpherson's strong admonition of the Metropolitan Police for 'institutional racism' in 1999 we wonder what a similar judge might have made of the government's failure to listen to minority Muslim community voices in the aftermath of 7/7. Perhaps the only defence the government might offer is provided by top-down think tanks like Policy Exchange where there is absolute clarity that the same Islamist and Salafi 'minority voices' are as extreme and obnoxious as the British National Party [10]. Here again, a judge would have provided equal clarity for counter-terrorism practitioners and the public by adjudicating on the issue. Instead, nearly four years after 7/7, Policy Exchange and its acolytes, continue to dictate the debate in terms many Muslims describe as Islamophobic. Perhaps therefore a public enquiry is still viable as well as being overdue. Even at this late stage, it may be the only forum in which community conspiracy theories and self-serving top-down narratives can be laid to rest. Once that ground has been cleared it may become a little easier to approach the tactic the 7/7 bombers adopted on their own terms.

8.1 REFERENCES

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