

Observations from a Britain at Risk

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Jane and I were in Yorkshire with friends on July 7 when we learned of the bombings. We were to meet Jane's sister and a friend in London the next morning for 8 days in that city. Because ground transport was suspended Janet flew into Manchester and we cancelled our London sojourn. This was an intense time, when Britain dealt with its losses and prepared for additional attacks. My observations reflect what I saw and read, especially compared with the US after 9/11 and with Arab-Americans. Certain facts were changed later.

Reaction: An observer said of Tony Blair's statement to the nation, "This was the talk he knew he would have to deliver." A head of security had said an attack was inevitable. The British were not surprised or traumatized as we were after September 11. Perhaps with IRA bombings they could put this in perspective, not believing it had 'changed everything,' as we said in 2001. It was violent, it happened, let's get on with it.

Preparation: The London police and administration were impressive. They had prepared for this and knew what to do. They moved into the bombing sites, sealed them off, sent in medical and forensic units. All public ground transport was closed, much opening the next day. There were frequent bulletins and a web site informing citizens of how to get around.

Media Coverage: Media coverage was very differently from how the US covered its attacks. There was more news and interviews with officials and little of the opinionated, inflammatory, ideological rhetoric that we experienced. There was also coverage of other stories, such as the G-8 Summit at Gleneagles in Scotland. The BBC had their scheduled afternoon cooking show. In the US it was around-the-clock terrorism. The news was cool and informative, not hot. That evening the BBC announcer said that they had graphic photographs of the carnage but they would be disturbing so they had decided not to use them. They would have been used in the US. One interviewer asked the Minister of Defense if he thought his policies in the Middle East had contributed to this. Anyone asking such a question in the US would be pilloried as a 'liberal' or worse.

US Coverage: As reported, some American pundits blamed Britain for its tragedy. Americans coined the phrase 'Londonistan,' saying Britain was so concerned about civil liberties that it allowed London to become the 'terrorist center of Europe.' (There is a liberal asylum policy and some British imams are inflammatory). Comments on Fox TV appeared callous and indifferent to human suffering. For example, one (Brit Hume?) said Britain should have let France have the 2006 Olympics (announced for London just the previous day, amidst much jubilation) since if Paris were blown up no one would care.

Confusion: As in September 11, information was very confusing at times. Initially they announced that just a few had died. The number at the end of our visit was 52 but Tony Blair said the government had liaison with 72 families. (One underground train was demolished so there could be more bodies in that). Families were very frustrated that after several days there was still no confirmation of the dead by name. In Madrid they had

released names and returned bodies to families, and then discovered they had made mistakes. This caused much distress. London was determined not to repeat this mistake.

Birmingham: In the evening of July 7 they evacuated downtown Birmingham because of a ‘credible’ threat. No one criticized the police when it turned out to be a false alarm.

US Reaction: The President’s statements of support were widely covered. When the US ordered its forces to stay out of the M-25 circle around London, this was not seen as supportive of Britain in its hour of need. We were driving towards London when we learned of it, having rebooked our rooms. We assumed Bush knew of coming attacks and cancelled out. One cartoon showed Bush saying he will give full support to Britain, but only beyond the M-25. The ban was lifted the next day, making it seem ill considered.

Home Grown: People were stunned to realize that the bombers were British. Three were Pakistani and one a West Indian (Jamaican) convert to Islam, a parallel with shoe bomber Richard Reid. None were Arabs. Most were ‘clean skins,’ meaning the security forces did not have them under surveillance.¹ One was a special education teaching assistant who had recently visited parliament with students. The Pakistanis were from Leeds in Yorkshire. They played soccer and mixed with friends. The oldest was 30, the youngest 19. One had made a 24-hour visit to Israel just prior to when two British Pakistanis blew themselves up.

Mirpur: The 3 Pakistanis were from the small impoverished region of Mirpur in Pakistani Kashmir. 40% of Muslims are Pakistanis and 70% of them are Mirpuris. Most Mirpuris are from subsistence farms and came in the 1960s and 1970s to provide cheap labor. Few had education. In Pakistan, they are treated by the dominant Punjabis ‘as the Irish were treated by the English.’ They follow a small 19th century revivalist Sufi sect called Barelwi, not respected by Sunnis. It is ironic that the largest element in the community is isolated and marginal both ethnically and religiously. They recruit Imams from the villages, few of whom speak English. They serve overseas Pakistanis and do not relate to British society. Few are involved in the Muslim Council of Britain. Arab Muslims have their own organization.

Pakistan: All three Pakistanis had been in Pakistan during the past year. Two went together. One observer said they did not get brainwashed in Pakistan. They learned hatred in Britain and went to Pakistan to make contacts. Still, Pakistan was a factor.

Generational Disconnect: The Pakistanis were from respected families. One family owned three businesses including a popular fish and chips restaurant. The father drove a Mercedes. Other parents were also settled. There is a disturbing phenomenon. Muslim girls thrive in the open British environment. They go to college and do well on examinations. Boys experience a dysfunctional second-generation syndrome. They grow up in Britain without roots or identity and learn Islam from militants who hold ‘youth rallies’ or run ‘youth clubs.’ [Some of these youth clubs are actually funded by government community development

¹ A year later, a report indicated that some had appeared on lists but only because of their contacts with other persons. None were themselves under surveillance or considered a threat.

monies].² Some guys wander the streets and under perform in school. (Twice as many Pakistani girls take A levels as boys).³ They have been labeled the Orphans of Islam. One bomber was said to be at loose ends so his parents sent him to Pakistan for three months to study Islam and recover his roots. Two or three dropped out of university. One had athletic plaques. What went wrong?

Detroit Arab American Study (2003): Nearly 90% of Arabs were proud to be Americans, most saw it as a land of equal opportunity, most were optimistic about the future, almost all spoke English, many were well educated, most had confidence in local institutions, including the police. Most favored strong security measures so long as they did not target Arabs. Most youth seem to be doing well. Few American Imams would not speak English.

Leadership Disconnect: Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is headed by Sir Iqbal Sacranie, who is Malawi born. Few young Pakistani Muslims identify with him. When he visited a Leeds youth center, someone said this would be the first such visit and no one would know who he was (even though he was frequently on television). Some 'official' Muslims seem detached from their community. Some even require protection. This is not surprising since that is the British pattern for 'established' [official or sanctioned] religious leaders in general. Imams were not prominent in the aftermath and were often criticized by other Muslim leaders.

Leadership Reaction: Because the bombers were home grown, the whole community was implicitly under surveillance. (In the US, non-citizen recent arrivals were the focus). Muslim leaders warned against an overreaction but also issued calls to weed out extremism. The four Muslim MPs (all Labour) met with Blair and held a press conference. The fact of Muslims in parliament was noteworthy. Their words would be rare in the US: the Muslim community needs to look inward to its own responsibility. Why had they not assimilated more? Why did young men think bombing is consistent with Islam?

Khalid Mahmood, MP for Birmingham): "The extremists have no negotiating demands. They are not like Hamas or the IRA. They don't have a foreign policy agenda save hate and some kind of revolution...Many of the organisations that get hold of these youngsters are involved in criminal network through corruption or credit card fraud. We need more people to confront these organizations and challenge their thinking. It is too easy to go [with] the flow, so all Muslim leaders have a responsibility. We also have a big problem with much of the religious education that goes on in mosques after school. It is totally unregulated and much of it is of low quality. None of the teachers are subject to any normal child protection regulation, yet this is where many people's minds start to be shaped. I have argued for many years that we need to do something about the incitement to religious hatred and the quality of the religious teaching in mosques. We can do that through the current legislation if necessary. Abu Hamza and Bakri Muhammad [militant sheikhs] need to be dealt with. At the very least the Home Office should press ahead with a requirement that the teachers in mosques face tests about speaking English and have an

² Subsequently, authorities learned that these young men had been on white water rafting trips. These appear to be team building exercises.

³ A Levels are pre-university examinations.

understanding of British culture. Speaking half intelligibly to young people helps no one. I have no reason to think that this stems from economic deprivation. In my constituency I have Afro-Caribbean, white and Muslim poverty.” (Guardian, July 14).

Omar Muhammed Bakri is a Syrian Imam in Britain. He is an advocate of jihad and a defender of suicide bombings but says there is a covenant of security with Britain which prohibits attacks on the home government. He had been living on welfare since 1986.⁴

Chatham House, a think tank, issued a report saying that the invasion of Iraq has “given a boost to the al-Qaeda network” in terms of “propaganda, recruitment, fundraising.” Sound bite: “Riding pillion with a powerful ally has proved costly in terms of British and US military lives, Iraqi lives, military expenditures and the damage caused to the counter-terrorism campaign.” Blair and his ministers were pressured with allegations that their Iraq policy had contributed to the environment that produced these attacks.

Press Coverage: The press are very candid in covering the community. One report noted some extreme anti-British sentiments. An example cited was a belief that the bombs had been planted by the security forces. After September 11 there were comments that the CIA or Mossad had organized the attacks to discredit Islam, that 4,000 Jews had advance warning and stayed home, that the Koran in the misrouted luggage of a hijacker had been planted by the government. Seldom did the responsible press describe these views as what they were. Such comments were left to Fox News, Daniel Pipes and others whose orientations discredit them in responsible eyes. The British are more blunt.

Steve Bell, the Guardian cartoonist, had a series of cartoons which portrayed a cow and goat in a field. Cow to goat: You look uncomfortable—are you feeling ashamed of being a Muslim? Goat: nah mate. Cow: Have you got a guilty conscience? Goat: Nah mate, It’s me piles. I’m a martyr to me piles! Cow, running off: Police! Police!. Next day: Officer with hand extended to goat: Frame: At Difficult times like these, Frame: we must Reach Out to the Muslim community, Frame: and feel its collar. Only then will be truly safe. Frame: goat darts between officer’s legs and runs off. Officer: Oi!!! Bastard got under me radar!! When I returned to the states, there was a flap over a cartoon in the Dearborn paper that showed a Mexican in a big hat. Asked if he wanted to know where the immigration office was, he said not. He wanted to know where the welfare office was. There were large angry meetings even though the paper apologized.

CCTV: Britain installed security cameras a few years ago amidst concerns about privacy. Now people are glad those cameras were in place. They provided graphic photos of the bombers. Support for the police was uniformly strong

Incidents: There were incidents of people stopped on the street by police. In one case a Muslim man and woman (covered) were thrown to the ground and frisked. This would have created a major incident in the US but did not there. One English young man was stopped in a similar way. There were reports of hostile threats and words. The community

⁴ He was soon deported.

is concerned about backlash and profiling but this is not the issue it would be in the US. Note: on July 7 the website of the Muslim Association crashed from hostile emails.

Jean Charles De Menezes: On July 22, police killed a Brazilian electrician on the underground. He had been in a building under surveillance. He wore a heavy coat on a warm day. When told to stop, he jumped a turn style and ran onto a train. They pushed him onto the ground and shot him eight times, six in the head. Initial reports from passengers said he was 'Asian looking,' had wires coming out, and had a bomber belt. None of these things were true. He had fair skin, "European" features and spoke good English. His visa had expired 2-3 years before and he may have feared deportation. "As he got on I looked at his face. He looked sort of left and right, but he basically looked like a cornered rabbit, a cornered fox. He looked absolutely petrified." Clearly, once he jumped the turn style he was a dead man. The police were in a special unit (inspired by an Israeli unit, with Israeli advisors) authorized to kill suicide bombers before they can detonate. (Operation Kratos is named after the Greek god of strength). Shooting into the body might not stop them. Following the logic of the unit, he could not be allowed to surrender lest it be a trick and he detonate. The police apologized; his family in Brazil said they would sue; all politicians said the unit should continue; the police said it was possible they would kill other innocent people; some people said he brought it upon himself. There was no anti-police reaction.⁵

Civil Liberties: Asian civil rights activist Shami Shakrabarti heads the organization Liberty. She was interviewed several times. Asked if the police might have been justified in killing the Brazilian, she said perhaps. Asked if the police guidelines on when to kill a suspected bomber should be released, she said not in their entirety since that might compromise the unit. There should be a discussion, internal and external, about the guidelines for killing but the police had done much good since July 7. We need a press conference by the chief explaining their policies and reassuring the public of their restraint. We need to make sure there are no undeserved attacks upon Muslims, but she was very security conscious. Her words focused upon threat deterrence more than rights.

Nativist Extremism: There are extremist groups such as the British National Party that want to expel all Muslims. They are few and marginalized but are potentially dangerous. The PM and police were blunt about them. There is nothing quite like the BNP in the US.

Failed Bombing: A second string of four bombings failed on July 21. The detonators exploded but the bombs did not go off. All bombers were caught on camera. One was wearing a 'New York' sweatshirt. (NY subway authorities began bag inspections about this time). Another was wearing a baseball cap. One bomber was Somali, one Eretrean. They came to the UK at ages 9 and 11 as refugees. One got first dibs on a council flat as a 'vulnerable' person. One was sentenced to five years for violent crime. There is

⁵ Three weeks later the police story was exposed as lies. He had not jumped the turn style, worn a long coat, or run. It appeared to be an on-site execution without provocation. There were no charges brought against the police. At this point, there were calls for the resignation of Sir Ian Blair, head of London policy, who had received high praise earlier.

controversy in UK over tens of thousands of failed asylum cases ordered deported but still in the country. Abu Qatada, purported spiritual advisor of Mohamed Atta, Richard Reid, and Zacharias Moussaoui, received attention. Most likely, deportations will be accelerated.

Bombers: The July 7 bombers shaved their bodies, a ritual thing to be pure when one enters paradise. They left their names and credit cards in their shoes for identification. It will be interesting to see if the July 21 bombers were shaved. Those may have planned to escape alive although one threw himself onto the floor in a crucifix form. Having disappeared, they must have safe houses and supporters. This may involve many people.⁶

Earlier Threats: On July 23 a court in India sentenced Mohammed Afroz to 7 years for planning to hijack Heathrow planes 9-11-01 and crash them into the House of Commons and Tower Bridge. Three men from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan were booked on flights to Manchester but panicked and fled just before boarding. Two cases were dropped but Afroz was convicted. In February, Sayid Badrat, 25-year-old Gloucester college graduate pleaded guilty of planning to blow up a plane between Amsterdam and the US. In 2004, Operation Crevice arrested 8 UK Pakistanis and confiscated half a ton of ammonium nitrate fertilizer in a London bomb plot. There is much danger.

Cost: The bombings cost 300 million pounds in lost tourism so far.

Family Statements: The mother of a bomber issued a statement that since she did not know how to grieve for her son she would grieve for the dead and wounded and their families. It was very moving. The mother of the West Indian was a convert living in the US. She had been in public housing and was not easily found. She gave a statement before cameras. She was completely covered in black with only her eyes showing. She expressed distress at the events and said she had no idea what led her son to conclude that Islam would allow what he did. One bomber had produced (and abandoned) a child with a British woman. Her mother renounced him and said they completely disassociated themselves from him. One July 21 bomber was turned in by his father. Many families expressed distress and confusion. Some went into seclusion. Some could not speak.

Guardian Poll: July 19. 2/3 see a link between Iraq policy and attacks. 75% expect more attacks. 35% say PM Blair bears 'a lot' of responsibility for the attacks, 31% say 'a little.' 28% say Iraq policy and the attacks not connected. 71% would deport or exclude radical foreign Muslims who incite hatred. 53% support national ID cards.

Guardian/ICM poll, July 26: 1/5 Muslims say they or a family member faced abuse or hostility since 7-7. 63% have considered leaving UK. 30% are pessimistic for their children, 56% optimistic. Possible factors in attacks: 80% list UK participation in Iraq war; 57% say failure of clerics and community leaders to root out extremists (compared with 68% of all Britons); 2/3 cite Islamophobic and racist behavior (57% of Britons). Are Muslims doing enough to prevent extremists infiltrating their community? 38% yes, 50% no. Does the Muslim community need to do more to integrate into mainstream British culture? 40% yes, 32% say about right, 18% say they have integrated too much already.

⁶ Within a short time all of the persons associated with the attempt were arrested. Some were in Italy.

Daily Telegraph Poll of Muslims, July 23: 88% condemn bombings; 18% feel little or no loyalty to UK, overwhelmingly men and youth; 50% do not believe British leaders who say they respect Islam and Muslims; 52% are impressed by Sir Iqbal; 37% believe an accused Muslim would receive a fair trial; 2/3 believe Muslims bear responsibility.

Muslims : Muslim population is 1.6 million of 60m. 40% are Pakistani, 12% Bangladeshi, 8% Indian, 9% African, 5% Asian. 43% live in London, others in Midland cities). 9% of black Britons are Muslim, most from Africa. Only 0.79% of West Indians are Muslim compared with 20% of black Africans. In prison, 9% of population is Muslim. (Note: Another source said 20%).

Follow Up

In early 2006 there was a raid on a London neighborhood where there were alleged to be stores of fertilizer-based explosives such as used in Oklahoma City. In one house, two Pakistani brothers were arrested. This was quite dramatic with scores of heavily armed police surrounding houses and removing evidence. One brother was shot in the arm. The initial story was that he had a weapon but it later turned out that this was not true. The police found no explosives or other evidence of wrongdoing and the men were released.

In the summer of 2006 nearly two dozen people, again mostly Pakistani, were arrested in a plot to blow up ten US planes leaving from Britain. Police said investigation of the plot had begun just after July, 2005 when someone from the community reported suspicious activity. The Pakistani police played a major role in uncovering this plot.

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