

UK schools

The UK foment of Islam's radical fringe

Stephen Fidler, Jimmy Burns and Roula Khalaf JULY 13 2005

Suicide attacks on London's transport system a week ago by young Muslims who were born and grew up in Britain is prompting soul-searching inside and outside the country's Muslim community. The community has produced suicide bombers before but they have travelled abroad to carry out their morbid tasks. The willingness of a few young men from Yorkshire to blow up their fellow citizens in their own capital – more than a tenth of whose population is itself Muslim – has opened up a debate that may produce far-reaching policy and other changes.

The bombings have also energised an international discussion about British policy towards radical Muslims in its their Britain's midst. A series of Articles in the US American press has reflected the view among Some US officials that think British official tolerance of radical foreign Muslims, many of whom have sought refuge from harsher regimes, at home, sowed the seeds of Thursday's bombings. A similar message has come out of commentary in France, where the authorities have taken a much harsher line than the British against radical Islamists, especially since a series of bombings in hit Paris in 1995.

Though those now known to have been behind Thursday's suicide the London attacks were British, it is not yet clear whether there was a foreign mastermind or logistical support. behind the bombings. Whatever facts eventually emerge, some reassessment of British policy towards radicals within the Muslim community can be expected.

In the view of US critics, the UK has been far too tolerant of radical Muslims in its midst and should, for example, have acted more quickly and more forcefully in arresting clerics such as Abu Hamza al-Masri and Omar Bakri Mohammed, whom they see as having fomented ing extremism. Abu Hamza, whose Finsbury Park mosque in north London acted as a magnet for extremists including Richard Reid, the shoe bomber who tried to blow up an airliner in December 2001, was arrested in May last year. His trial on charges including incitement to murder Jews and other non-Muslims started this month. and 004 and faces extradition to the US. Another UK based radical cleric, Omar Bakri Mr Bakri Mohammed, whose group was criticised for glorifying the September 11 attacks, told a Portuguese magazine last year that British troops in Iraq were "terrorists" and predicted that several groups were planning to target the UK. He also said the life of an

unbeliever, in other words a non-Muslim, had no value.

“There is a certain amount of reluctance on the British to move quickly. What they never seem to realise is that by the time they know they have a problem it is too late,” a former senior US intelligence official said this week.

In France too, officials have been long-standing critics of British tolerance of Islamist dissidents, particularly from North Africa. They also believe that their policy at home of cracking down on jihadists and supporters – while not guaranteeing safety – has been more effective than Britain's. Surveillance of radicals is much more intense, with every mosque monitored; extremists and purveyors of hate speech are harassed and deportations are much more frequent.

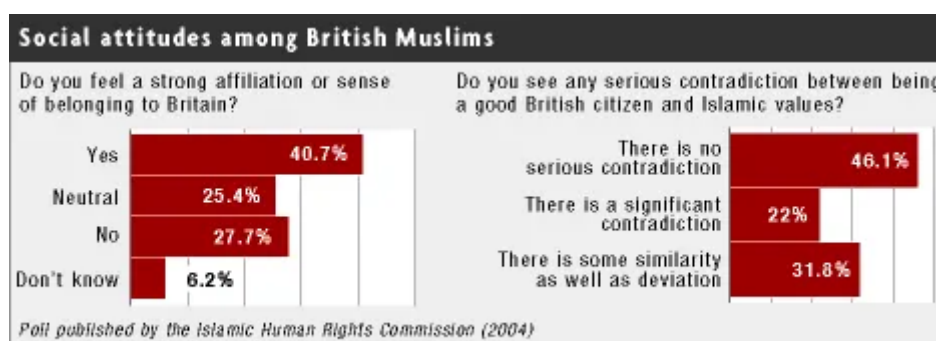
“The British do not have this system of permanent surveillance, with deep penetration of problem communities,” Alain Chouet, former director general of the DGSE, the French foreign intelligence service, told *Le Figaro*. Referring to MI5, Britain's domestic security service, he added: “On the contrary, they have with MI5 a machine that performs well once the threat has been declared.”

Mr Chouet said French harassment techniques had limitations “but they upset networks and prevent them from moving into action”.

The charge, then, is that the British approach to extremists is too soft or too reactive. While British surveillance of extremists is acknowledged to have been more intensive than elsewhere in Europe, bar France, the claim is also that the UK government does not really understand what is going on inside Muslim communities. Though the government has tried reaching out to leaders of the Muslim community, it is not clear how well connected with most Muslims some of these leaders are.

Britain has tried a light touch in part because it has wanted to avoid action against extremists that would risk alienating what the government takes to be a quiet majority of Muslims. British security officials argue that the more than half-dozen terrorist plots they have uncovered before and after September 11 show they are doing something right. And while they acknowledge that there may once have been some substance to the French claims that the British were careless about the safe haven it offered to Islamist radicals, that has not been the case for more than a decade. “From 1994 onwards, I don't think the ‘Londonistan’ claims could be levelled with any accuracy,” says one.

There are also important cross-channel divisions differences that mean the UK is unable to follow aspects of the French approach. One is legal: France's system of investigating magistrates is said recognised by some in the UK as well as in France as more effective in dealing with terrorism than Britain's adversarial based judicial system. Security officials say one reason why they do not detain suspects more quickly is because security services they need are trying to gather evidence that will stand up in court.



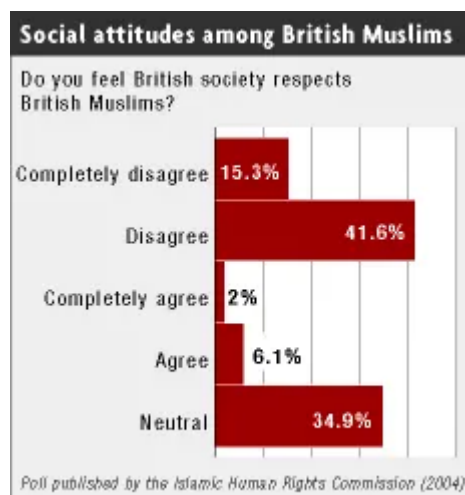
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France has also chosen a course that insists on assimilation, as shown by the government's insistence that the dispute OUTCOME?? about headscarves and other religious adornments should not be worn in schools. Britain's approach by contrast has been largely to let Muslim communities alone. There is still some official pride in the traditions of the rule of law, free speech and safe haven to dissidents. One official says the security services do not know whether increasing numbers more people than before were listening to more people THAN WHAT are heeding radical clerics. or not. "Attendance at a mosque and listening to a radical cleric or a moderate cleric is not a criminal offence. Free speech is entirely lawful and we don't monitor the activity of people going to mosques," he says.

Moreover, the experience of France, burned in the furnace of the Algerian war of independence that ended in 1962, is different from Britain's. People from the Asian subcontinent make up close to 80 per cent of Britain's 1.6m Muslims, Pakistanis alone accounting for 45 per cent of them. By contrast, North Africans make up more than half of France's Muslims, 30 per cent of whom are Algerian.

The Not everyone agrees either with the perception of British laxness in dealing with the issue is by no means universal. "There are no liberal laws here," says an official of Amnesty International, the human rights organisation. "The UK has some of the most draconian emergency legislation in the whole western world."

Arab political activists this week warned that blaming last week's attacks on London's historic role as a refuge for dissidents is also designed to divert attention from the real threat. "There is no evidence that the liberal values here are a reason behind last week's attacks," insists Saad Djebbar, a London-based Algerian lawyer. "There are many countries that don't allow any groups on their territory and have had the same terrorist attacks."



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While it is true that, 10 years ago, individuals who used to incite violence against targets outside the UK were rarely prosecuted, human rights activists say the liberal image of the UK as a country with liberal asylum and immigration laws is no longer valid. Even before the September 11, attacks, legislation was tightened and suspects can now be indefinitely detained without trial.

Moreover, though nothing has been announced, British policy does appear to have shifted its emphasis in the last two years. Abu Hamza's arrest last year and the placing of his Finsbury Park mosque into the hands of moderate Muslims was seen as a watershed. Moreover, The British government last year also increased MI5's budget, mainly to help it deal with counter-terrorism, which occupies two-thirds of its personnel. The extra funds at increased budget should allow the agency to increase its staff from 2,000 people last year to 3,000 in 2008.

Whatever decisions are taken in dealing with Islamic extremism – and disaffected Muslim youth – there seems no chance that it is a the problem that will is unlikely to go away. In last summer's Washington Quarterly, Timothy Savage, a US foreign service officer expressing his own opinion, argues that dealing with Islam will do more to shape Europe than any other issue this century. One third of Britain's 1.6m Muslims are under 16 – compared to a fifth of the population as a whole. Timothy Savage, a US foreign service officer expressing his own opinion, argued in last summer's Washington Quarterly that dealing with Islam will would do more to shape Europe than any other issue this century. If current trends of immigration, a low birth rate for non-Muslims and a high Muslim birth rate continued, he said, "Muslims could outnumber non-Muslims in France and perhaps in all western Europe by mid-century." According to the Pew Research Center, the population of the European Union's current 25 member states will be one-tenth of Muslim by 2020.

Detailed but little-noticed research on the attitudes of British Muslims, published by the London-based Islamic Human Rights Commission at the end of last year, suggested a critical attitudes to view of British foreign policies and a fear of being stereotyped as terrorist suspects. The research, based on interviews with young people mostly between 15 and 29, found respondents overwhelmingly negative and critical about the British government's foreign policy in towards the Palestinians, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Bosnia and Iraq. In another finding, 57 per cent of respondents disapproved of the requirement for new British citizens to swear an allegiance to the crown. Queen.

Another area of major concern in the IHRC among those survey was a perception ived sense of increased Islamophobia in the aftermath of 9/11. A clear majority of respondents felt that thought anti-terrorist laws and the way they were being implemented, coupled with media reporting of police investigations, needed to be more sensitive about the "stereotyping of all Muslims as potentially hostile terrorist suspects".

Massoud Shadjareh, the IHRC's main spokesman, for the Islamic Human Rights Commission, says: "There has been a radicalisation of the British Muslim community – but in the sense of a raising of consciousness about issues which Muslims feel strongly about. The biggest expression of this has been the participation of British Muslims in demonstrations against the war in Iraq. But this doesn't mean that you now have large numbers of British Muslims prepared to blow people up."



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According to Mr Shadjareh, firebrands such as the Syrian-born Mr Bakri Mohammed Omar Bakri, cleric who moved to the UK in 1985 and was the leader of the radical al-Mujahiroun radical group, have been “politically demonised” but have “no support whatsoever” negligible backing among the large majority of British Muslims. “He has between 50 and 100 supporters who turn up for his meetings.”

Nevertheless, British UK officials do recognise that clerics such as Abu Hamza playing an important role in radicalising young British Muslims. “There is certainly a link between some of the individuals and the radicalisation of young Muslims. When you look at the textbook of radicalisation, more often than not a radical cleric is somewhere in the picture,” says one security official.

How many such radicals there are is hard to tell. Sir John Stevens, the former head of Scotland Yard, London’s Metropolitan Police, has said that there are 10,000-15,000 supporters of al-Qaeda. But security officials say they see this number as a reflection of passive support – the milieu in which it is possible for terrorists to operate – rather than the number of potential terrorists.

“Al-Qaeda’s strategy is deception,” says Saad al-Faguih, a Saudi Islamist dissident who denies any involvement with terrorism. “Look at the 19 bombers from September 11: they did nothing to show links with Muslim activities.” People who do this are extremely unlikely to move around well-known figures.” These clerics also have regular legal advice and their statements are very well calibrated so they can be defended as free expression rather than incitement to terrorism.

Before In the run-up to the bombings, the UK police and MI5 were working on the basis of intelligence assessments that there were about 300 British nationals who had gone through or been trained in al-Qaeda camps and most the majority of which were identified and had been under surveillance. Their most worrying admission, however, was their an estimate that there could be as many as 30 unidentified people among them British nationals about whom they had no

undecided people, among them British nationals, about whom they had no intelligence but who could potentially mount attacks.

Officials say British participation in the US-led invasion of Iraq has motivated some radicals – but they are cautious about numbers. “A steady trickle of radicals is travelling from the UK to Iraq,” says one. But in the past they have gone to Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan. The fact is that there were and are young men who wanted to go and fight jihad. It’s still in its early stages in terms of the numbers in Iraq. So far the numbers going to Iraq are far lower than Bosnia. A few we know have come back.”



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Finding out who will turn from radicalism to terrorism is a tough task for the security services. The initial reaction of neighbours of from those who lived near the young Pakistani suicide bombers in London suggests they kept their activities and views secret from their neighbours and parents. “Those who engage in terrorism don’t go around shouting about it before doing it,” says Mr Shadjareh. “There is also some evidence that British Muslims who turn to terrorism are converts or reconverts, and do not have a really deep and sophisticated understanding of the Muslim faith.”

he says. The point is reinforced by Stephen Ulph, a terrorism expert at the US-based Jamestown Foundation: “Is the presence of these movements of Islamic activism, whether savvy or less savvy, contributing to an international environment which is allowing less savvy, less educated youth to make their own conclusion?” Yet however, the security services respond, one growing theme has emerged out of the debate so far. That is that moderate Muslims need to make their voices heard strongly against terrorism, begin to recognise that solutions have to come from inside the community as well as outside. In an unprecedented move, The Muslim Council of Britain published a letter last year in which it asked the authorities of 1,000 mosques to preach peaceful Islamic doctrines, be vigilant against extremists and co-operate fully with the police. Yesterday in the House of Commons, Shahid Malik, Labour MP for Dewsbury, where one bomber had his home, said the attacks represented “a defining moment” both for the country and for the its Muslim community. “Condemnation is not enough. British Muslims must, and I believe

are, prepared to confront the voices of evil head-on,” he told parliament. the House of Commons.

Yet some resist even the sort of steps that would attempt to bring Muslim leaders closer to the government. is resisted. Imran Waheed, UK representative for an organisation called the ultra-radical Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain, says: “The proximity between some individuals and organisations in the Muslim community and the British government has serious implications for the real interests of our community.

“If sincere, these individuals and organisations must now ask themselves why the British government, which pursues a brutal colonialist foreign policy over the entire Muslim world, is so keen to fund them, promote them and support them.”

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