

After Heathrow: What accounts for the threat of terrorism?

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There is still little substantive information on the alleged plot to explode transatlantic flights from Britain to the US in mid-air. To date, the British government has provided no facts to substantiate its claims of a conspiracy to commit mass murder in the air.

Unless and until it does so, the public has both a right and a political responsibility to withhold its judgment on the government's claims.

Most press commentary is given over to reporting on the lives and backgrounds of many of the 23 people being held in Britain as a result of last Thursday's police sweep. (One of the 24 initially arrested has been released.)

Such coverage is legally presumptive and suggestive of guilt. It prompted an admonishment by Attorney General Lord Goldsmith and Home Secretary John Reid that the media was in danger of prejudicing any future trials.

The government's warning is disingenuous. It was Reid himself who held a press conference on the morning of the police raids in London and the West Midlands at which he baldly stated that the "main players" in a terrorist conspiracy had been arrested.

The following day, in an unprecedented move, the Bank of England froze the assets of 19 of those held in custody and published their names. The youngest is 17 and the oldest 35. This action, authorised by the Treasury, began a media feeding frenzy that has included camping outside family homes, publishing photographs and quizzing residents and friends.

This has been accompanied by assertions that more than 1,000 British citizens are committed to fundamentalist Islamic ideology and involved in terrorist activities. In addition to this "core group," politicians and the media have denounced the "Muslim community" for failing to address the alleged cancer in its midst and being blinded to reality by religious dogmatism.

The *Sunday Times* editorialised against "The Enemy Within". This it described as fanatical British-born Muslims "educated in the country and brought up within a tolerant democracy," many of whom "seem all too ordinary, perhaps enthusiastic about football and cricket and living 'normal' westernised existences," but who are amongst a "generation of disaffected Muslims who see any excuse as a reason for killing their fellow citizens."

In an article entitled "What Makes a Martyr?" the *Sunday Telegraph* wrote of a "sophisticated network" of Islamic fundamentalists that "casts its net wide over many hitherto-moderate Muslim youngsters. Its modus operandi is now a well practised, psychological approach aimed at brainwashing 'clean

skins'—those with moderate backgrounds."

The *Telegraph* cited a recent government report that, amongst young Muslims, both the "well-educated and the disaffected poor are ripe for conversion, first to radicalism, sometimes then to terrorism: the former in our universities, the latter in mosques or prisons through a sense of disillusionment with their current existence."

If such claims are to be taken at face value, it means that hundreds of young people from all walks of life, including the highly educated, are preparing with cold-hearted indifference to kill and maim their fellow citizens.

Yet, despite the gravity of the scenario presented, neither the media nor the government make any attempt to explain how such a situation could come to pass. With one voice, they bitterly denounce any suggestion that the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq and Britain's support for Israel's attack on Lebanon have contributed to this disturbing state of affairs.

On the Conservative Party right, the *Telegraph* declared, "... in fact, the extremists who plot mass murder give very little evidence of being motivated by the details of Britain's foreign policy." The nominally liberal and pro-Blair *Observer* denounced the suggestion that Britain's actions overseas were perceived as anti-Islamic as "ludicrous lies". Foreign policy should not be adapted so as to placate those who had "crossed a line into psychopathic criminality," the newspaper declared.

A similar litany has been repeated ad nauseam by the Blair government so as to suppress all criticisms of its wars of aggression in the Middle East. It dovetails with President Bush's declaration that "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists."

Such claims turn reality on its head. It is not those who oppose imperialist war and warn of its political impact who are endangering the lives of the British people, but the architects and defenders of these wars.

Even as it denies that British foreign policy plays any role, the media fails to offer any alternative explanation for the influence of Islamic fundamentalism. The July 7, 2005 bombings in London, like 9/11 and the attacks in Bali and Madrid, are attributed simply to "brainwashing". The *Observer* says in passing that alienation amongst young Muslims must be tackled, but does not attempt to address where it comes from, much less say what is to be done about it.

One week prior to last week's police raids, Blair made a speech

in the United States on British foreign policy in which he denounced “reactionary Islam” and advocated as an alternative a set of supposed “global values” based on “freedom, respect for difference and diversity”. Such rhetoric from a man who has trampled over civil liberties and the democratic process, and has conspired and lied in order to flout international law, can only fuel contempt for official hypocrisy.

Blair demands of the disaffected that they worship at the altar of Mammon and accept Washington’s claim that its wars for “regime change” in pursuit of oil and other vital resources are about spreading “democracy”.

The impact of Iraq, Afghanistan and the Lebanon is, in reality, a crucial starting point in explaining the growing alienation of Muslim youth in Britain. But in itself it does not explain why antiwar sentiment, which is shared by the majority of the British population, would find expression in an inclination to commit murderous and reactionary attacks.

The same is true with regards to the growing social polarisation within Britain that has condemned many young people to enormous hardship. Millions grow up with no prospect of achieving many of the things their parents took for granted—career advancement, their own home, a secure and decent-paying job—and have a sense that they inhabit a world that is indifferent to them.

All of this combines to fuel hostility to the existing political and economic order. But for this to pass over into a readiness to kill innocents and commit suicide in the process, other factors must be at work.

At one time, millions of people in Britain and internationally looked to the labour movement as the agent of political and social change. Opposition to economic oppression, attacks on democratic rights and militarism found political expression in the socialist aspirations that animated working people, and the younger generation in particular.

No such avenue is offered today. Instead, the Labour Party and the trade unions are indelibly associated with big business, racist immigration legislation and the promotion of “identity politics” based on ethnicity, gender and religion, which is used to undermine any class-based approach to social problems.

This is the outcome of a process that has spanned decades, and has had a highly damaging impact on the political consciousness of working people. Ever since the mid-1970s, the labour movement has collaborated in the systematic lowering of the social position of the working class. First under Margaret Thatcher and John Major’s Conservative Party governments, and from 1997 on under Labour Party Prime Minister Blair himself, the old workers’ organisations have embraced a neo-conservative agenda that has transformed Britain into a low-wage, low-tax sweatshop for the transnational corporations and the super-rich.

To make matters worse, they have proclaimed this as the best of all possible worlds and led an international campaign to hail the “death of socialism”.

Every means for influencing and changing society has been systematically closed down to working people by a government that boasts of its determination to defy the popular will and impose the interests of the financial oligarchy. Not even on such life-and-death matters as war are working people allowed any influence—as

was underscored by Blair’s dismissal of the mass protests against the imminent invasion of Iraq in February 2003.

The initial manifestation of the official labour movement’s attack on socialist consciousness was to reduce the aims of the workers’ movement to the so-called “bread and butter” issues of trade union struggles. The transformation of society was proclaimed a distant utopia long before it was rejected out of hand. Millions know very well that Labour’s embrace of capitalism has, in fact, proved devastating from the standpoint of the living standards of the working class. They must understand that it has also exacted an appalling price ideologically.

It is the political vacuum created by the disintegration and decay of the labour movement that ultimately gives succour to the fundamentalists. They are able to exploit feelings of injustice and denounce Western militarism, portraying the reactionary policies of the capitalist ruling elite as a war on Islam. Theirs is indeed a reactionary creed, but it nevertheless makes an ideological appeal by promising a better world than that which currently exists.

If one accepts the claims of the political establishment and the media—designed to justify further attacks on democratic rights and new imperialist military adventures—that large sections of Muslim youth have turned against society as a whole, then one must conclude that the capitalist system, which these same spokesmen defend, has demonstrated its utter and irreversible failure.

Only the revival of the workers’ movement on genuinely internationalist and socialist foundations can overcome religious obscurantism by inspiring and empowering workers and youth with a scientific perspective for unifying the world’s people. And the objective social and political conditions for the emergence of such a movement are growing daily.

Amidst the hysteria that is being whipped up over the alleged Heathrow terror plot, these are the critical questions that must inform the response of working people.



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