

Britain's terror plot: What drove a doctor to become a suicide bomber?

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12 July 2007

The detention of at least seven medics in connection with last week's failed terror attacks in Britain has added to the public's sense of shock. All the more so since the alleged perpetrators of the attacks were both initially identified as doctors working at Glasgow's Royal Alexandra Hospital.

These were, after all, men said to have driven two Mercedes packed with petrol, gas cylinders and nails and parked them in London's West End, one of them outside a crowded nightclub on Ladies Night, and then driven back to Scotland to carry out a suicide attack on Glasgow Airport. Only chance prevented terrible carnage. The driver of the explosives-loaded Jeep in Glasgow is in critical condition after dousing himself with petrol and suffering burns to 90 percent of his body.

It has since been revealed that only the Jeep passenger, Bilal Talal Samad Abdullah, is a doctor. The driver, Kafeel Ahmed, a 27-year-old from Bangalore, India, is a highly qualified aeronautical engineer with a PhD. Even so, the participation of two highly educated men in such an outrage—and the possible involvement of many others from the medical profession—is a deeply troubling aspect of an already appalling chain of events. It has prompted many to ask how someone who in his professional life is dedicated to saving lives could even contemplate taking the lives of so many innocent people.

Attempts to answer this within the media have been, at best, limited, but one issue raised stands out as significant. An article in the July 8 *Observer* stated: "Terrorism experts point out that all the members of the Hamburg cell, which planned the 9/11 atrocities, studied technical sciences or medicine. Abdullah Azzam, the original mentor of Osama bin Laden, was a Palestinian medical doctor. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the spiritual leader of Al Qaeda, comes from a family of doctors and medical experts.... As Professor Marc Sageman, a counter-terrorism adviser to the US government observes: "Terrorists are usually seen as being ignorant and immature, as coming from a poor background and a broken family, with no skills and no family or responsibility. Little of this is true for Al Qaeda members and supporters."

The claims regarding the Hamburg Cell are overstated. Most were involved in technical rather than medical sciences. But the point that Islamic terror groups find fertile ground for recruitment amongst educated layers, including doctors, remains an important one.

The leader of the July 7, 2005 attacks on London, Mohammad Sidique Khan, was also involved in a caring profession, working as a community enrichment officer in schools with special needs pupils and as a learning mentor. He left a suicide video declaring, "I and thousands like me have forsaken everything for what we believe.... Your democratically elected governments continually perpetrate atrocities against my people all over the world. Your support makes you directly responsible. We are at war and I am a soldier."

All available evidence suggests that such views came to be shared by Bilal Abdullah. An examination of the biography of the only man charged so far in connection with the terror plot helps shed light on how this came

to be. And it refutes the repeated claims of the Labour government that British foreign policy, above all Britain's participation in the war and occupation of Iraq, played no role in last week's terrorist attacks and, in general, has nothing to do with the growth of terrorism.

Notwithstanding the terrible nature of Abdullah's planned crime, there is a tragic element to his fate. He appears to be someone driven over the edge, to the point of murderous and suicidal rage, by the systematic and ongoing destruction of his country. Though reportedly a devout Muslim for many years, the seeds of his participation in the plot to murder scores of innocent men, women and children were sown by the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the murder of perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iraqis at the hands of US and British troops, the incarceration and torture of thousands more, and the civil war between Sunni and Shia sparked by the destruction of the country and fuelled by the policies of the US-led occupation forces.

Born in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, he moved to Iraq with his parents as a child. His father, Talal, is a doctor and encouraged Abdullah to follow him into the profession. However, the end of his medical training at the University of Baghdad coincided with the US invasion of 2003. In the year before he graduated in 2004, his professor, Ahmed Ali, described the impact of the war on Abdullah.

He was one of the most radical students after the war, engaged in continual protests and active in forming resistance groups inside the college, Professor Ali said. According to the professor, Abdullah said, "We should not learn medicine. We should learn how to fight the occupation."

The war and occupation had a devastating personal impact on Abdullah. His father was one of Iraq's top orthopedic surgeons and had a private clinic in Baghdad. This was reportedly destroyed. The *Daily Mirror* reports that, in 2005, Talal was forced to flee Baghdad to northern Iraq after being threatened by the Shiite Mahdi Army.

After graduation, Abdullah left Iraq to study at the University of Cambridge. It is not known whether he was already politically involved with a particular group, but he was bitterly angry, profoundly anti-Western and very possibly sympathetic to Al Qaeda.

Much of what is reported about Abdullah comes from Shiraz Maher, then a member of the radical Islamic group Hizb ut-Tahrir, who was assigned to recruit him.

He says of Abdullah, "He told me how he hated Saddam Hussein, how even after the American invasion his extended family stayed [in Iraq]. All were of the same ideological persuasion. All believed in Wahhabi ideology.... He developed a vitriolic hatred for the Shias after one of his closest friends at university in Iraq was killed by a Shia militiaman. He would say they needed to be massacred."

Maher continued, "Bilal talked about the validity of jihad, about expelling American and British troops. He described jihad as the highest pinnacle of Islam.... He would laugh when we talked about a particular bomb attack in Iraq. We all rejoiced then."

Abdullah reportedly never mixed socially with white people and even spurned Muslims who he considered to be too westernised. Maher describes how Abdullah threatened one of his flat mates for playing the guitar and showed him a video of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, killed by the US in 2006) beheading a hostage. According to Maher, Abdullah threatened his flat mate, saying, "If you think I'm messing about, this is what we do. This is what our people do—we slaughter."

Those seeking to deny or minimize the role played by the Iraq war in fostering terrorism more and more fall back on the assertion that its perpetrators are Islamic fundamentalists, adherents of an ideology that is unconditionally opposed to the West. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has taken up this mantra from his forerunner Tony Blair, insisting in the aftermath of the failed car bombings that terrorism is "unrelated in detail to one specific point of conflict in the world."

The media has slavishly echoed this theme, with many publications citing the views of former Islamic fundamentalist Hassan Butt that "what drove me and many others to plot acts of extreme terror within Britain and abroad was a sense that we were fighting for the creation of a revolutionary worldwide Islamic state that would dispense Islamic justice." The issue is then reduced to the supposed doctrinal problems of Islam and the inability of radical Islamists to relate to the non-Islamic world. In Butt's memorable phrase, "Since Islam must declare war on unbelief, they have declared war on the whole world."

Such explanations are almost invariably accompanied by yet more transparent apologies for the incendiary actions of the major powers, insisting that any and all feelings of indignation and bitterness towards the West are based on "mythical" grievances. What is required is the correct pursuit of Brown's campaign to win "hearts-and-minds," by encouraging Imams and Muslim people to combat extremist doctrines and insisting on a respect for "British values" of tolerance and democracy.

One cannot imagine a more toxic mixture of arrogance and stupidity.

Such claims amount to a political blank check for whatever further predatory actions may be taken by British imperialism and for measures targeting British Muslims, which invariably encroach on universal democratic rights such as free speech. They can only help drive angry and disoriented individuals such as Abdullah towards fanatical and reactionary forms of political Islam. What other outcome could result from preaching "British values" to those whose lives have been ruined and who have seen hundreds of thousands of their countrymen and co-religionists killed—all in the name of spreading democracy?

At no point can such apologetics even pose the question as to what drives apparently intelligent young men to embrace the reactionary ideology of Islamic fundamentalism and join the ranks of terrorist groups, or the growth of Islamist parties and movements more generally.

Islamic fundamentalism has emerged out of a terrible tragedy, one that is played out on a daily basis and which affects not merely the small number of individuals drawn to terror groups, but millions of the world's people. The hell-on-earth created in Iraq is only the most brutal example of the depredations inflicted by the Western powers on the Middle East and other regions, creating the conditions for Islamist movements to find a receptive audience amongst all social layers, including the most politically disoriented representatives of the middle classes.

Islamic fundamentalism is an ideology promoted and utilized by broad swathes of the Arab bourgeoisie to legitimize their own rule. Whabbism, or Salafism, is the official doctrine of the Saudi ruling elite, out of which Al Qaeda emerged, combining as it does an ultra-conservative theology with fanatical anticommunism and a defence of private property and class oppression. The very Western powers that now rail most vocally against Islamic fundamentalism, the United States and Britain, played an instrumental role in cultivating these movements in Afghanistan, Bosnia and elsewhere precisely for this reason.

Ultimately, however, the ability of Islamic fundamentalism to win mass influence is due to the absence of a genuinely progressive, anti-militarist and anti-imperialist alternative.

In the past, millions of people—many with a similar background to Abdullah—sought to oppose imperialist oppression on a progressive and often socialist basis. In particular, they looked to the Stalinist Communist parties, only to have the confidence they placed in them repeatedly and bloodily betrayed. The Iraqi Communist Party, which once had more than 25,000 members and enjoyed a mass following, supported the military government of Abd al-Karim Qasim and then accommodated itself to the Baathist regime that came to power in 1963, forming a national Front with it in 1973. When Saddam Hussein turned on his former Stalinist allies, in part to signal his desire for an accommodation with Washington, many thousands of militant workers and socialist intellectuals were imprisoned and executed. Since 2003, the Iraqi Communist Party has participated in the puppet regime installed by the US.

The rise of Islamism is also the price paid for the degeneration and failure of the secular nationalist movements—many of which presented themselves as socialist—but which either collapsed or became the direct instruments of imperialist rule and now preside over despotic regimes.

It is this political vacuum that has been partially filled by the Islamists, who feed off of the very real and legitimate grievances generated by imperialist domination and capitalist exploitation and channel them in a misanthropic and regressive direction. At its root, it is an ideology of political despair, the path taken by some who see no other course and no other mass movement that so much as makes a pretence of offering sustained opposition to such historic crimes as the destruction of Iraq.

As was so horribly demonstrated with the July 7, 2005 London bombers, Islamist fundamentalism can find support in Britain because the mass popular opposition to war and to the Labour government's socially divisive measures can find no expression within the official structures of politics.

Combating the growth of Islamic extremism is possible, therefore, only through the forging of a new political and social movement in Britain and internationally based on a socialist programme—one that mobilises a united offensive of working people for an immediate end to the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, the defeat of imperialism, and the economic and cultural elevation of the world's people on the basis of genuine democracy and social equality.



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