The 7 July London Bombings: Islamic Extremism Strikes Again

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Theme: This ARI focuses on the aftermath of the London bomb attacks of 7 July 2005.

Summary: London and its citizens were expecting a major terrorist attack basically since 11 September 2001. The question was never 'whether' such an attack would take place, but rather 'when' it would happen. On Thursday, 7 July, it finally did happen. This article will focus on the aftermath of the attacks and the fall-out for London, the UK, and Europe as a whole.

Analysis

The Bomb Blasts

The attack on London consisted of four bomb blasts between 8:51am and 9:47am. The first three attacks hit the London underground (the ‘tube’), at King’s Cross, Edgware Road and Aldgate, while the last one was on a London double-decker bus in Tavistock Square. As of late Thursday, 14 July, the death toll was 52, with hundreds injured. The attacks were perfectly timed with the opening of the G8 Summit in Gleneagles, Scotland. However, the awarding of the Olympic Games of 2012 to London the night before was coincidental, given the time needed for the preparation of the terror attacks. Unlike the Madrid, blasts which took place just a couple of days before the national elections, the London blasts did not aim at a change of government –Prime Minister Tony Blair had just won the elections– but at passing a strong message to the West in general and the G8 states in particular that no supporter of the US is invulnerable.

Experts from the London Metropolitan Police and other British authorities believed from the very first hours after the blasts that either al-Qaeda itself or an al-Qaeda affiliate was behind the attacks. Unlike the first reactions immediately after the Madrid bombings nobody seriously suggested that a local terror organization, eg, the IRA, could be behind the blasts. The IRA, committed to be accepted as a legitimate political actor, would simply lose too much of its political capital. Furthermore, the attacks were quite similar to the Madrid blasts in March 2004 so that a link with Islamist extremism was obvious from the very beginning. However, it is still doubtful whether the statement on the Internet, released by a certain ‘Secret Organization of al-Qaeda in Europe’ should be considered credible or not. This previously unknown organization celebrated the blasts as ‘a blessed raid’ committed by mujahideen resulting in a Britain burning with ‘fear, terror and panic in its northern, southern, eastern and western quarters’. The statement also contained a warning against Italy and Denmark as supporters of the US in Iraq.

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Experts first doubted that the attacks had been suicide attacks. Since the attacks resembled the Madrid bombings, it seemed more likely that the bombs had been triggered by mobile phones. However, on Wednesday 13, nearly one week after the blasts, spokespersons of the London Metropolitan Police confirmed that the attacks had indeed been suicide attacks. Closed circuit TV (CCTV) coverage from Leeds and London’s King’s Cross Thameslink Station contained footage of four young men with backpacks who then proceeded to board different trains. Obviously, these four persons detonated their backpack bombs personally in the three trains and the bus. It also emerged that the locations of the attacks in the North (first explosion), in the South (second explosion), in the West (third explosion) and in the east (fourth explosion) were chosen to resemble a Christian cross—a signal for all onlookers that the perpetrators saw themselves as ‘martyrs’—.

As a result of the blasts, the whole public transport system, including trains and buses, was shut down for hours. Londoners, used to IRA terror attacks for many years, took the attacks in their stride, mourning the victims and the injured while going on with their lives without panicking.

The Suicide Bombers
As of today, Thursday 14, all four suicide bombers have been identified. All of them came from Leeds. None of them was known to be a fanatic, neither to the police nor to their neighbours and friends, and none of them ever visited one of the hangouts of Muslim fanatics. Shezad Tanweer, 22, who killed seven people at Aldgate, was known as a cricket and ju-jitsu enthusiast, with dyed hair and good looks. He was known to be a devout Muslim and he visited mosques regularly, but he never expressed any interest in politics. Mohammed Sidique Khan, 30, who also killed seven people at Edgware Road, was a primary school teaching assistant and a married father of an eight month-old baby. Hasib Hussain, 19, who killed 13 people in the double-decker bus in Tavistock Square, did actually have a troublesome youth. He failed school and changed his life only after a Hajj to Mecca and a visit to Pakistan. Still, there was no clue that he had turned into a fanatic. Of the last to be identified, Ejaz (Nadim) Fiaz, in his early thirties, who killed more than 30 people on a Piccadilly Line train at King’s Cross, little is yet known. Since their transformation into suicide bombers came as a surprise in their places of origin, the police fear that they could be members of a larger terrorist cell. Thus, further terror attacks could be possible. Security forces are now investigating the environment of the four suicide bombers. So far, they have already found a bomb factory with a substantial amount of explosives.

Assessment: The Impact of the London Blasts
First, the terror attacks of 7 July highlight the fact that we have to deal with a new breed of Islamist terrorists. These new terrorists act on their own without any guidance from the top of the al-Qaeda hierarchy. All these new terrorists need are an ideological foundation for their acts, the know-how and, of course, explosives and weapons. Ideology and know-how come from al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups, for example by way of training videos available at certain websites on the Internet. The hardware is much more difficult to get, and the law enforcement agencies in the UK do not yet know where the military-type explosives and detonators used in the blasts originally came from. However, the biggest obstacle against suicide bombings so far was the special mindset needed for committing such acts, at least in the perception of security experts. Before the London blasts, it was accepted wisdom that the infrastructure needed for suicide bombings did not exist in
Western states. Security experts—including this author—believed that a suicide bomber would need constant physical and psychological supervision until the final phase of the attack in order to cope with the mental stress of a suicide attack. Nobody was prepared to believe that a group of Muslims hailing from a Western-oriented middle-class background would be capable of doing that. The events proved all these experts wrong. It is a chilling thought that these suicide bombings, the first in Europe, could be the prelude of even more suicide attacks, committed by Western-born sons—and daughters—of Muslim immigrants. Preventing such attacks in open societies seems to be ‘mission impossible’ indeed.

Secondly, terror attacks like those in London and in Madrid are typical examples of what is now known as ‘asymmetric warfare’. Terror attacks are usually the weapons of the weak, ie, of movements which do not possess enough power to confront their enemy—imagined or real—on a battlefield. The war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq is a case in point: allied forces under the leadership of the US as the last superpower do possess overwhelming firepower, in the air, on the ground, and at sea. Waging conventional campaigns against the US-led alliance would thus be futile and suicidal. The only choice left in the eyes of either staunch Iraqi Baathists or international Muslim extremists is a campaign of terror. The targets are not only soldiers, and the locations are not restricted to Afghanistan or Iraq. Instead, the targets are quite often innocent civilians—contract workers in Baghdad, for example, or holidaymakers in Bali, or the citizens of Madrid or London—. Osama bin Laden himself stated that terror is the most dreaded weapon in the modern age, since it attacks the psyche of European and American citizens. Because of the unpredictability of such attacks, the population as a whole suffers from fear and helplessness, thus gradually undermining their states’ capability to act decisively against the terrorists and their demands.

Unfortunately, such attacks also result in spreading suspicion and, time and again, in mindless counter-violence against other innocent people. In the Netherlands, for example, several mosques were torched as a ‘revenge’ for the assassination of Theo van Gogh, and the Arab newspaper al Jazeera reports that British Muslims have already received hate mail, threatening them with acts of revenge for the London blasts. The President of the Muslim Association of Britain, Ahmed Sheikh, fears that women wearing Islamic headscarves (hijab) could be in particular danger. Therefore, it should be emphasised again and again that we—the West— are not fighting against Islam and Muslims in general, and that the extremists are actually only a small group. If we fail to do this, if we start seeing in every Muslim citizen a potential terrorist, we are doomed to strengthen the forces we are fighting against. We will alienate more and more of our citizens who happen to be Muslims, thus turning a substantial part of our societies into a recruitment base for Osama bin Laden and his followers.

Another result of such attacks is the immediate call for tougher laws and more power for law enforcement agencies. Prime Minister Blair already hinted that new laws could be rushed through Parliament which would include provisions for new offences such as condoning or glorifying acts of terrorism. Apart from smacking of populism, accelerating plans for tougher anti-terrorist laws under the fresh impression of a terrorist attack contains the danger of sacrificing certain democratic rights for the elusive aim of total security. Indeterminate detention for terrorist suspects is probably the most doubtful of such measures, even though it may be very tempting to introduce such a law in the aftermath of an attack: such a law facilitates dealing with persons suspected to be either terrorists themselves or at least supporters of terrorists but against whom there is not enough
evidence to bring them to justice. Here, one should take a look at Spain as a role model on how to deal with terrorism without sacrificing democratic values. Indeterminate detention is a road not taken by the Rodríguez Zapatero government.

The call for tougher laws is not restricted to societies immediately affected by the terror attack. The ‘Secret Organization of al-Qaeda in Europe’ explicitly mentioned Italy and Denmark as the next possible targets, and states with a large Muslim population like Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands could also be on the hit list. As a consequence, anti-terrorist laws are under discussion in these states, too. In Germany, for example, the terrorist attacks of 11 September in New York, 11 May in Madrid and now of 7 June in London nurture a controversial discussion about a greater role for the Bundeswehr (German Army) within the country, say, to protect airports or other important facilities.

Whatever the reaction of individual states, the European Union as a whole has to act decisively to create what The Times of London calls a harsher atmosphere for terrorists operating in Europe. The EU’s finance ministers already agreed to introduce measures to block the terrorists’ access to bank accounts after the Madrid blasts. The London blasts – roughly three years after Madrid – should give a new momentum to these plans, driving home the message that decisive action is needed now and not in an indefinite future.

However, combating terrorism by way of introducing tougher laws or creating new anti-terror units on the national or the EU level will not necessarily result in more security. Such measures are largely reactive anyway. What is desperately needed is more action on the preventive side of the war against terror. Supporting democratic movements in Muslim countries would be a sensible tactic in this regard.

Conclusion

Open Societies and Terrorism

Attacks such as the recent London blasts will probably continue for years to come. In a sense, these attacks are the price we have to pay for meddling in Middle Eastern affairs. If we intend to win the war on terrorism, and if we are serious in trying to build up democratic societies all over the world, thus forcing many traditional or at least conservative societies to change, we –the Western societies as a whole– are prone to be attacked again and again: on the home front in the style of Madrid and London and, in a worst case scenario, in the style of 9/11; or abroad, in the style of the Djerba and Bali blasts or the attack in Luxor, Egypt, in 1996. In open societies, such attacks are simply impossible to prevent. As one terrorist once said, ‘You have to be successful every time, we only need to be successful once’.

Terror attacks can never be justified, and they can never be excused. However, it is important to examine the motivations behind such attacks in order to prevent them from happening too often. In the case of the Madrid and London blasts, the motivations behind these acts seem to be the same: revenge for the Western occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq in particular and for the perceived injustices committed against Islamic societies in general. Al-Qaeda’s number two, Aiman al Zawahiri, recently declared that it would be a mistake for Muslims to believe that the Western forces in Afghanistan and Iraq –he calls them ‘crusaders’– can be defeated by peaceful means. Unfortunately, given the actions of US-led forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, his message is appealing to many young Muslims.
all over the world. The killing of innocent civilians, say, in Falluja, erroneous attacks of wedding parties in Afghanistan, the desecration of the Qu’ran or the (imagined or real) torturing of Iraqis in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay send a much stronger message than any talk about democracy ever could. And, as the blasts in London show, this message finds willing hearers even among young Western-educated Muslims.

Sadly, the way we currently wage our war on terror is the best public relations tool Osama bin Laden and his followers could hope for. What we need to realize is that we do not only fight against something, but also for something: for our democratic values, for our way of life. To take up an old slogan, we should also wage a war to win over hearts and minds. This war already exists in Muslim societies. People like al Zawahiri are under attack by influential Muslim scholars and intellectuals. For example, Sheikh Muhammad Sayed Tantawi, the chief cleric of the influential al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, and the highest authority in Sunni Islam, declared that the aim of evicting Western troops from the Iraq cannot be taken as a justification for the murder of innocent civilians; and all influential leaders in the Muslim world condemned the London attacks –including Palestinian Hamas, by the way–.

In our war on terrorism, we should support these critical voices by offering serious political signals for the solution of Near Eastern and Middle Eastern conflicts and a future-oriented plan for a democratic Iraq –including the funds necessary for turning them into reality–. On the home front we should stop merely talking about ‘multi-cultural societies’ and start to seriously try to integrate them, not ignore them. It is impossible to prevent all future terrorist attacks, of course, but perhaps we will at least be able to prevent the worst of them, thus avoiding another ‘Iraq on the Thames’.