London Terrorist Attacks: the Impact of 7/7 on British Muslims

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**Theme:** This ARI explores the implications for British Muslims of the 7 July terrorist attacks in London.

**Summary:** This ARI explores the implications of the London terrorist bombings of 7 July 2005 for British Muslims, and considers the various reactions and perceptions among Britain's Muslim communities in the immediate aftermath of these atrocities. It examines the emerging impact of the bombings on British Muslims, and the ways in which the British authorities are responding to their concerns.

**Analysis:** The London bombings of 7 July 2005 have reawakened memories of similar events in Madrid in March 2004, when commuters were also the targets of indiscriminate terrorist violence. Interestingly, while the political circumstances in Madrid and London look very different (with the Spanish government, unlike the British government, facing an imminent general election), the British media have been quick to point to lessons that London could learn from the Madrid experience. On the one hand, it has highlighted the need for the British government to prevent survivors of the blasts and the victims' families feeling ignored by the authorities, something that seems to have been the case in Spain. On the other hand, on a more positive note, it has urged British people to follow Spain’s example of not reacting to the terrorist attacks with anger towards Muslims there. Indeed, one of the major challenges in the aftermath of the London bombings is how to avoid a backlash against Britain’s Muslims that could have serious long-term implications for community relations.

Thanks to recent global political developments, British Muslims are very conscious of the extent to which acts of terrorism are being perpetrated supposedly in the name of Islam. There is also awareness how far these acts have been linked to the concept of jihad, despite the fact that among Muslims what jihad means has been debated –and contested– from the time of the Prophet Muhammad onwards. Until 7 July 2005, however, this terrorism was directed at targets outside the UK. And while British Muslims were not immune from reprisals –there were numerous documented attacks on Muslims in Britain after 9/11– they were, in a sense, ‘cushioned’ from the full repercussions of these events. Now that Islamist terrorists –possibly linked to the al-Qaeda network– have attacked London (where one in seven people is a Muslim), the implications of this kind of violence have been brought home to British Muslims in a new and more acute way, prompting efforts by community and religious leaders as well as individual Muslims to distance themselves from those responsible for the bombings. After 9/11 there was certainly condemnation and outrage on the part of British Muslims. But New York was thousands of miles away, far from the day-

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to-day realities experienced by most British Muslims. Now terrorist actions have literally taken place where British Muslims live and work (Aldgate and Edgware Road tube stations, for instance, are close to important centres of Muslim life in London), and so British Muslims are just as threatened as anyone else in London or the UK: indeed, the dead, injured and missing appear to include local Muslims from a range of backgrounds.

However, what distinguishes British Muslims from the majority of people living in the UK is the fact that they might themselves become the victims of reprisal attacks, due to their presumed ‘guilt by association’. Dilowar Hussain, director of the East London Mosque (located very close to the Aldgate tube station), accordingly called on people not to be frightened, but to be careful and to remain alert: he has expressed particular concern that the mosque itself might be attacked (The Times, 8/7/05, p. 17). Within hours of the bomb blasts there were signs that retribution had already started, ranging, for instance, from more than 30,000 abusive e-mail messages posted to at least one mainstream Muslim website that caused the server to crash, to a suspicious fire at a mosque in Leeds (as well as the petrol bombing of a Sikh temple in Kent). By Saturday, some 70 incidents had been reported, including the suspicious fires, two possible assaults, verbal abuse and threatening calls. As one Muslim student at Oxford University commented, ‘We’re caught in the middle of the Venn diagram. We wear two labels: British and Muslim. The rest of the British population is looking at us now and thinking, “Where do they fit in?”’ The problem is that the word Muslim nowadays is synonymous with terrorism.’ Other responses from ordinary Muslims that were reported in the press included the comment: ‘We shouldn’t call the people who did it Muslims… they have no mercy in their hearts. [They] should be taken out and punished.’ On the one hand, there was criticism of the British government for being too lenient on Islamic militants living in Britain, who, it was felt, gave the rest of the community a bad name. On the other hand, other Muslims were of the opinion that the authorities had suggested too prematurely that the bombings had been carried out by Islamic militants, since British Muslims, already under intense scrutiny, would suffer retaliation as a result (Daily Telegraph, 9/8/05, p. 8). Either way, Muslims have talked of being sickened and devastated by the indiscriminate violence linked to their religion.

Thus, Muslim leaders across the country have unequivocally condemned the atrocities and sought repeatedly to assert the ‘British-ness’ of Muslims in the UK. At the same time, they have also warned their communities to brace themselves for some kind of backlash. Sir Iqbal Sacranie, recently-knighted Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB –possibly the most representative Islamic organisation in the UK–), has highlighted the general response in his well-publicised call for unity: ‘it is our hope that we will remain together in our time of crisis and not allow extremists to divide us’. For him, whoever the perpetrators were and whatever faith that they profess, the pursuit of ‘justice’ can never be allowed to be used as an excuse to justify violent acts of injustice against the innocent (Daily Telegraph, 8/7/05, p. 25). According to the MCB, such indiscriminate acts of terror were evil deeds that ‘make victims of all of us’ (Daily Telegraph, 8/7/05, p. 25). Together with ‘Churches Together in Britain and Ireland’ (an umbrella organisation for the mainstream Christian denominations), the MCB has also released a joint statement repudiating the use of such violence, and denying that religious precepts could be used to justify crimes that were completely contrary to Muslim and Christian teaching and practice. The Federation of Student Islamic Societies has issued a similarly strong condemnation of ‘these cowardly acts of violence’ that had attacked ‘our shared human values’. So too has the Islamic Society of Britain, which has promised ‘to stand in solidarity with the nation’, with its president, Munir Ahmed, urging people to ‘keep alive
the Olympic spirit… terrorism will not defeat us’ (ISB press release, 8/7/05, p. 17). In similar fashion, the UK Islamic Mission disassociated itself completely from any organisation, claiming to be Muslim or otherwise, that carries out acts contrary to the teachings of Islam: peace, justice, freedom and the love of humanity (UKIM press release, 8/7/05). In mosques across the country, imams took the opportunity of Friday prayers to condemn the bombings and to tell their congregations that they had no reason to be ashamed but should go about their daily lives as usual. The Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, likewise, has stressed the importance of defending Britain’s multicultural community and has voiced concern about some of the language used in the media, particularly radio phone-ins. Azad Ali, chairman of the Muslim Safety Forum, where Islamic leaders and senior police officers meet to discuss the policing of terrorism and other issues, has reinforced this point by saying that, while he was happy with the way that the police were handling hate crime so far, the media was not being helpful when it used terms like ‘Islamic terrorist’. Instead, he called on them to stick to what the police were saying, that the bombings were the work of criminals: in his view, everyone needed to remember that ‘crimes are committed by individuals, not communities’ (Guardian, 9/7/05, p. 7).

The condemnation emanating from different Muslim organisations and community groups since 7 July seems to have succeeded in largely silencing attempts to condone the terrorists’ actions. Unlike earlier atrocities such as 9/11, when even liberal voices in the UK felt that British Muslim criticism of ‘Islamic terrorism’ had been muted and when there seemed to be a degree of ambivalence about events across the Atlantic, British Muslim reactions to the London bombings seem to be far less ambiguous. In Luton (a town to the north of London that contains a substantial Muslim minority), for instance, even a local leader of the radical group, al-Muhajiroun, who last year praised the Madrid bombings and warned that Britain had to expect to be attacked, chose not to comment to the media, preferring, in his words, to concentrate on his family instead. Likewise, the press reported that the radical Islamic political group Hizb ut-Tahrir had responded to the bombings by handing out leaflets at the town’s central mosque, which called on Muslims to ‘come together as a community with one voice’, emphasising that the rules of Islam prohibited the harming of innocent civilians (Guardian, 9/8/05, p. 7), though at a national level, while Hizb ut-Tahrir issued a statement condemning claims that the London bombings had been committed by Islamist extremists, it failed to denounce the attacks explicitly. Meanwhile, the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) an organisation criticised for alleged links with groups such as Hamas, has expressed its ‘disgust’ at the bombings, claiming in its statement that ‘Islam holds the sanctity of human life in the highest possible regard and shedding the blood of an innocent person is seen as a crime most heinous and repulsive’ (The Times, 8/7/05, p. 17). Other known extremists keeping a low profile during this period included Omar Bakri Muhammad, the well-known radical cleric whose advocacy of violence has already been denounced by most of Britain’s Muslim communities. Across the board, Islamist organisations in Britain seem to have decided to adopt a lower and less confrontational approach in relation to developments in London, as compared with events in 2001.

The practical advice issued by different Muslim organisations on how to respond to the crisis, however, has varied, highlighting the extent to which British Muslims do not necessarily speak with one and the same voice. The Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), for instance, based on its intimate knowledge of how life for many British Muslims was affected by 9/11, has issued the advice that no Muslim should travel or go...
out unless strictly necessary. In particular it has advised Muslim women not to go out alone in isolated areas for fear of reprisal attacks. In the event of being attacked, however, it has urged victims not to retaliate and to report the matter to the police and appropriate authorities. Interestingly, the IHRC spokesman, Massoud Shadjareh, a long-time critic of the British government’s policies in the ‘war against terrorism’, has conceded that ‘the police have so far been extremely responsible, so has the home secretary. [Indeed] I surprise myself saying it.’ The Muslim Association of Britain has also highlighted the potential vulnerability of women in headscarves, and has asked police to consider extra protection for mosques and Islamic schools, warning Muslims against unnecessary journeys. In contrast, Inayat Bunglawala of the MCB has argued that, while Muslims needed to exercise caution, it is ‘ridiculous to say that [they] should stay at home. It is important that British Muslims are seen to be part and parcel of the community going about their lives’ (Guardian, 9/7/05, p. 7). Similarly, Dr Mohammad Naseem, chairman of the Birmingham central mosque, has questioned the IHRC advice, describing it as ‘a bit over the top’ (The Independent, 8/7/05, p. 27).

While the vast majority has reiterated its solidarity with mainstream British society, and has refused to be placed in the same camp as Islamist extremists, there is evidence to suggest that many British Muslims would favour more open discussion of the reasons why the bombings took place. Just as after 9/11, when they linked the attack on the Twin Towers directly to US foreign policy, so many Muslims in the UK cannot easily dismiss a close connection between the London bombings and Britain’s recent foreign policy decisions. Prime Minister Tony Blair and others may talk of the terrorists’ desire to attack British culture and the British way of life –in other words, its values– but for many Muslims this explanation downplays far too much the negative effect of British actions in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq. For them, the London bombs were not aimed against the British for who they are: rather, they were aimed against what Britain does. Acknowledging this connection, for British Muslims, certainly would not mean accepting that the violence is justified, but, in their view, it would help to dispel some of the broader anti-Muslim sentiment that will be generated by the events in London. Making this kind of political connection would divert attention away from assumptions about the supposed ‘clash of civilisations’ that often underpin debate about relations between Muslims and the West, and focus the debate instead on more concrete, tangible reasons for Muslim resentment. As David Gardner in the Financial Times (8-9/7/05, p. 12) pointed out, ‘the overwhelming majority of Muslims do not hate us for our freedoms. They do, however, despise [our] policies and some of the more frustrated among them are thereby prey to the siren songs of the jihadis.’ By insisting that the terrorists want to destroy (in Blair’s words) ‘what we hold dear’ is for many British Muslims unhelpful since it risks alienating them and, through its assumptions about differences between Muslims and other people living in Britain, encourages racism and a sense of exclusion.

Hence, another aspect of the current situation with implications for British Muslims is the growing speculation about the identity of the bombers. Currently, investigators remain hard at work trying to establish whether the London attacks were the work of extremists who moved recently to Europe or that of a home-grown group. Theories now circulating included the possibility that the bombers are: (1) home-grown self-taught British citizens; (2) experienced foreign professionals (although with local support); (3) ‘Iraqi bleed-back’, that is British citizens who have returned from fighting or training with insurgents in Iraq; and (4) a group of different kinds of people with different backgrounds, sharing the same commitment to violence in the name of religion (The Observer, 10/7/05, p. 3). Other
commentators have made specific reference to a possible Madrid connection, due to the apparent similarities between the two attacks (The Times, 9/7/05, p. 9).

The popular press, so far, however, has been quick to reject claims by the Respect Party MP, George Galloway, that the blame for the bombings lies with the government for its actions in Iraq, and that Britain is now ‘paying the price’ for its participation in the Iraq war (though curiously the right-wing Daily Mail –8/7/05, p. 18– was quite content to publish Max Hastings’s comment that ‘the price for being America’s foremost ally, for joining President Bush’s Iraq adventure, was always likely to be paid in London in innocent blood’, a statement with which many British Muslims –and indeed, large sections of the population at large?– would be likely to agree). By rejecting this kind of explanation so adamantly, there is a risk that many British Muslims will feel that they are not being listened to, and that their views are less important than those belonging to other groups making up British society today. This is not to say that British Muslims necessarily believe that highlighting the significance of the war in Iraq excuses the violence in London: as Sher Khan, chairman of the MCB’s public affairs committee, argued shortly after the bombings took place, ‘Whatever people feel about the current UK foreign policy, this cannot be used as an excuse to murder innocent people going about their business’ (The Guardian, 8/7/05, p. 23). What they do seem to feel, however, is that playing down, if not completely rejecting, its significance negates their views as British citizens as entitled to voice their opinions on matters of such great national importance as anyone else. Perceptions in this respect are all-important. And it is crucial that the British authorities should be prepared to recognise that, for a mixture of religious and historical reasons, Muslims living in Britain, as elsewhere in the world, possess a strong sense of belonging to the umma, the global Muslim community. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that they should feel frustration, resentment and even anger, when some part of this Muslim world or its diaspora are attacked or threatened. Rejecting these collective emotions out of hand –insisting that the ‘British’ component of the identity of British Muslims should take priority over everything else– will not help the British authorities to identify long-term strategies for dealing with attacks generated by its policies in other parts of the world, whether this be Iraq, Afghanistan or Palestine.

Conclusion: In conclusion, it would seem that –conspiracy theories aside (for example, a Muslim teenager in the East End of London is reported to have said, ‘Britain wants us out. I bet Tony Blair did it so people hate us’, The Observer, 10/7/05, p. 20)– British Muslims have responded less ‘defensively’ to the London bombings than was the case in relation to past incidents of ‘Islamist terrorism’. They are actively asserting their ‘British-ness’, and their complete rejection of the violence of the terrorists so close to home. They remain, however, aware that these events could very well trigger off reprisals against their communities, but, on the whole, they seem to have greater faith in the commitment of the British authorities to protect them in this situation. The authorities and the media, however, will need to do more than just talk about ‘unity’ and ‘belonging’. The vast majority of British Muslims have signalled their desire to be recognised as an essential component of British society during this time of national crisis. Religious and public institutions and in particular the British government now need to listen to them carefully, and to reflect on what they are saying about the policies that it is in the process of pursuing in their name, as well as in the name of the whole range of people who make up Britain today.