

A short note written for the Asymmetric Threats Contingency Alliance (ATCA) dated 21 July, 20005.

Fighting Terrorism: the battle for hearts and minds

The recent atrocities in London are the latest most important manifestation of the kind of asymmetric threat to civil society and world order which the ATCA was established to address.

I use the word 'address' advisedly as no group of individuals or countries would be able to counter these threats effectively without fully understanding their historical, cultural, social, economic, geopolitical, and operational dimensions.

It is therefore extremely important to debate fully and try to gain a deep insight into these aspects, as ventilated currently through this ATCA network and the broadsheets, while we are engaged in the 'whodunit-and-let's-get them' immediate and urgent task.

Let there be no mistake. We can debate and analyse the problem until the cows come home without improving an iota on the order and security situation, unless firm, decisive, and urgent action is taken to stop these terrorist acts on our soil.

It is therefore encouraging to see that the UK leadership are rising admirably to the occasion.

Without losing track of the broader debate, it is right to toughen our laws to nip potential local jihadism in the bud.

It is right to focus attention on the suicidal jihadists in both their local and international networks, including those madrasahs that tend to breed them, notably in Pakistan.

It is also right to 'seize the moment' as both the PM and the London Metropolitan Police Commissioner are reaching out to the Muslim religious and civic leadership to engage their support in recognition that terrorism is equally condemned by the mainstream Muslim faith.

But while such laudable efforts may succeed in containing home-grown jihadism, they run the risk of countering its operation but not its root causes. And such causes appear to lie deep in the hearts and minds of at least a dangerous fraction of the Muslim community worldwide, even if most of them do not resort to jihadism.

It seems facile to brand all jihadists nihilists. But unlike most nihilists, many jihadists appear to be intelligent young men and women of extreme idealism, converts to what in their warped yet steely belief is a just and noble cause to die for, in order to address perceived grievances against the West.

Such belief is not confined to the operational or potential jihadist terrorists. Though perhaps not yet in the UK, it may be embraced by members of their families as even

certain mothers were reported to rejoice in and tell their friends about what they claimed as ‘martyrdom’ of their beloved sons or daughters.

Many of such perceived grievances are ably outlined in Ambassador Harris and Lord Howell’s recent comments. Such grievances beg to be openly debated and discussed, not only nationally but also internationally.

What is more, the West should have the courage and conviction that while safeguarding law, order and security, it should be possible to build a more inclusive and harmonious multi-cultural society in the world community as it is possible to do so within one’s own nations.

Michael Portillo in the Sunday Times Comment referred to ‘tolerance’, ‘magnanimity and understanding’. Of course these words do not mean we should ever condone any trace of jihadism in our midst, of which we should remain resolutely intolerant. But we certainly need more magnanimity and understanding, together with commensurate national and international action, in addressing some of the perceived deep-seated grievances that are at the core of the jihadist mind.

To ‘root out’ this evil ideology, we need more than security intelligence of the operational kind. We need more emotional, psychological, and cultural intelligence, the intelligence of understanding, to engage the core of this ideology proactively, to pull the rug from under its feet.

As exemplified by the collapse of the former USSR or in Sun Tzu's Art of War, the best war is fought without laying siege to a city but in changing people's hearts and minds.

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