

Radical Islam, a worrisome, deep problem in Britain

By Jonathan S. Paris
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The arrest of at least 24 people in London, Birmingham and other British cities last week for allegedly plotting to blow up planes en route from London to the United States is a chilling reminder of how deep the problem of radical Islam in the United Kingdom has become.

Nearly all of the suspects are British-born Muslims of Pakistani descent. While there appears to be connections with Pakistani extremist groups, possibly even al-Qaida, the inescapable conclusion of this plot is that many British-born Muslims hate their country and America enough to blow themselves up in airlines carrying innocent passengers.

British-born children and grandchildren of South Asian immigrants are increasingly being politicized as Muslims with identities separate from their host British societies by local and global charismatic persuaders called "preceptors," from imams in London to radical Islamic icons such as Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al Zawahiri.

Based on what we now know about the July 7, 2005, bombers from Leeds and others who have been radicalized in Britain, the pull of preceptors appears greater than the oft-noted push factors of joblessness, discrimination and alienation. The imam in the local mosque who says to a young Muslim man searching for an identity, "You are not Stephen, you are Abu Bakr," nurtures the disciple's feeling of loyalty, not to his British nation or to his ethnic background but to the cause of Islam.

The young Muslim male from Leeds is now able to identify with Muslim victims all over the world from Chechnya, Bosnia and the Palestinian territories to Iraq. He also has an explanation for his grievances against his host country: Islamophobia. He now thinks that they discriminate against him not, as in the case of other non-Muslim minorities, because of his dark skin color, but because he is Muslim.

The role of the Muslim leaders is part of the problem. They too often promote the grievance politics of Islamophobia and mobilize otherwise apolitical Muslims to alter government policies on the Middle East and domestically.

Military and criminal law-enforcement approaches are inadequate to deal with the terrorist threat because they focus on the operational but not on the motivational side. They focus on Richard Reid, the shoe bomber, and Zacarias Moussaoui, the 20th 9/11 hijacker, but not on Abu Hamza al Masri, the imam who preached to Mr. Reid and Mr. Moussaoui at the Finsbury Park mosque in North London.

But persuasion is more than attending sermons of charismatic imams. It is also abetted by radical Islamists from afar, including Mr. bin Laden, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, who foster a strong sense of Muslims under siege by the West.

The local context and the international context reinforce each other, creating a compelling world view for a young British Muslim that includes these perceptions: Americans and Zionists are keeping Muslims down.

They are trying to reshape the Middle East by bringing down those who resist occupation. They are trying to keep Muslim Iran from having the ability to balance their terror with a Muslim nuclear bomb.

Ignited by cultural and political issues, such as the cartoon caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad this year and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jordan-based Hezb ut-Tahrir have increased global solidarity - and radicalization - among British Muslims.

By understanding the ideological indoctrination of British Muslims as the source of radicalization and separation from mainstream British values, Prime Minister Tony Blair's government can begin to craft policies to counter radicalization. The essential point is to counter the political agendas of Islamists.

British authorities are not going to have an easy time rooting out homegrown Islamic terrorists as long as large numbers of British Muslims look the other way. According to a poll commissioned for a British television program aired last week, 23 percent of British Muslims felt the 7/7 London bombers were justified because of British support for the U.S. war on terror. Fence sitters tend to go with the winning side. Both the government and the Muslim community need to demonstrate that siding with radical Islam is a loser.

The growth of Muslim true believers in the United Kingdom is a cause of great concern to British society. Countering increasing radicalization will not be easy. As called for recently by Mr. Blair, it may require a forthright assertion of British and European values and a recalibration of British laws to isolate preceptors and prevent them from spewing hatred in a way that attracts young Muslim followers.

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