

# Ideological DNA of terrorism : the role of ideology in Londons 7 July bombings

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## IDSS COMMENTARIES (63/2006)

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### **THE IDEOLOGICAL DNA OF TERRORISM: The role of ideology in London's 7 July bombings**

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ON 6 July 2005, London successfully won the bid to host the 2012 Olympics. A day later, on 7 July the euphoria of victory was drowned by shock, disbelief and hysteria. Life on three stations along the Eastbound (Aldgate), Westbound Circle (Edgware) and Westbound Piccadilly (Russell) lines of the London Tube came to a complete halt when three bombs were ignited simultaneously during the morning rush hour. Barely an hour later, a fourth explosion ripped apart bus number 30 that was plying along Tavistock Square and Upper Woreburn place, bringing the total number of deaths and injuries to 52 and nearly 800 respectively. Significantly, the attacks coincided with the G-8 summit that was being held at Gleneagles, Scotland.

A year has since passed but the emotional wounds and scars of the 7 July bombings are not easily healed or forgotten. The latest video released by *As-Sahab*, a production house within the *Al-Qaeda* media network, indirectly served as a harsh reminder that counter terrorism efforts must not lag behind. Traditional security threats and concerns could be addressed through military-based solutions and the fortification of the state's military capacity. However, how do we deal with such a non-traditional threat as terrorism that involves non-state actors or organisations? Can we combat the proliferation of extremism or deviant ideologies with mere knives and guns? These are salient questions worth pondering over as the dynamics of the world's security environment changes.

#### **Ideology**

Clippings in *As-Sahab*'s recent media footage included the final words of Shehzad Tanweer, one of the four suicide bombers involved in the 7 July attacks, segments of Osama bin Laden's previous video releases and the justification of Shehzad Tanweer's acts by Dr Ayman Al-Zawahiri. The endorsement by Al Zawahiri plays a strategic role in the video because he is the principal strategist of the global jihad movement. Moreover, the timing of the video release significantly tied in with the first anniversary of London's 7 July bombings. There are several issues which merit our consideration: One, the influence and role of ideology as a catalyst and justification for acts of terror. Two, the need for counter terrorism efforts to understand, in order to be effective, the ideational reach of extremism and its target audience. Essentially the fight against terrorism is also a fight against extremism.

The capability of ideologies and not just religious doctrines alone to condition behaviours or actions cannot be underestimated. Recent academic and official analyses have claimed that

individual and sporadic nodes have now replaced the Al-Qaeda network. However, this does not suggest that terrorism is no longer a threat and its counter-measures made any easier either. The constant use of religion as a justification for acts of terror in *As-Sahab*'s recent video also suggests that verses in the Quran or the precepts of holy war in Islam have been taken out of context to serve political purposes. For example, in the video, it was evident that acts of terror were justified by the notion of martyrdom to address the 'atrocities of democracies' and to regain the glory and rights of Muslims.

### **Reach and Target Audience**

What is both dangerous and alarming is the appeal of such Islamist extremism amongst selected individuals or even groups within the society. This implies that a global 'headquarters' or an 'international organisational nerve centre' need not be in place for local or home-grown cells to mushroom and be inspired to conduct similar acts of terror. It only takes a spark to get a fire going. Hence, it takes only one or two individuals to be exposed to extremism for it to later spread or proliferate.

The politicised nature of Islamist extremism meant that it might have a far-reaching influence on the different social strata of a society. Shehzad Tanweer, for example, was a university student from Leeds before he dropped out and carried out the bombing. Moreover, the role of extremist religious leaders in the preaching of extremist ideologies cannot be ignored too. This is so because of the authority that they have and their direct interactions with their followers could effectively mould behavioural patterns and shape political orientations. As such, the fight against terrorism is also a task to stem out the flow of extremist ideas.

### **Engaging the community**

To prevent and counter such indoctrination requires the effort of both moderate Muslim leaders as well as the community to take up a collective stand against extremism and terrorism. Essentially, we are no longer dealing with traditional warfare where enhanced military capability is the primary solution. Ordinary folks who are exposed to and indoctrinated with deviant ideologies are capable of pursuing actions with massive harm as shown not just in the 7 July bombings in London but also in the bombings in Southeast Asia such as in Bali and Jakarta. Terrorism and terrorist acts are manifestations of extremism. The main point is at the heart of extremism and terrorism, specifically, is a war against the minds. The correcting of deviant mindsets, beliefs and perspectives takes more than just a traditional military approach. In other words, the credibility of ideologies cannot be shaken by military actions alone. It requires the state's engagement with both the Muslim community and clerics.

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