

The London bombs: Iraq or the “rage of Islam”?

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Many commentators regard the London terror attacks as Tony Blair's payback for Britain's Iraq war. Sami Zubaida assesses the evidence.

The London bombings on 7 July were followed by a brief period of political unity in Britain, but very soon the voices of commentators arguing that the outrages were the result of the government's involvement in the Iraq war swelled into a chorus. Politicians like George Galloway and journalists like John Pilger (whose cover story in the *New Statesman* was headlined “Blair's Bombs”) accused Tony Blair of bringing the atrocity on London's citizens.

Britain, according to this line of reasoning, had become a target for Islamic anger because of war in and occupation of a Muslim country. Most were quick to add that these statements were explanation, not justification. But in any case, how good an explanation is it?

[A conditional rage](#)

A contrary argument centres round a term coined by Bernard Lewis in a 1990 article “The Roots of Muslim Rage” (*Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990). Lewis's arguments there and subsequently are well considered and historically grounded, although popular discourse takes up the idea of “Muslim rage” to imply an essential quality of religious sentiment.

It is interesting to note that the argument can appeal equally to those embracing the “rage” and those fearful of it. Islam, it proposes, is a conquering religion, whose intrinsic aspiration is to dominate others.

But the modern world has brought about the weakness and defeat of Islamic states, the end of the caliphate, and the colonisation or subordination of Islamic lands to non-Muslim powers. Christians, Jews and Hindus – who should, at best, be protected minorities under Islamic power – are now the dominant powers subordinating Muslims. This situation generates the “rage” which hits out against the dominant infidels and dreams of the restoration of Muslim glory.

The clear implication of this view is that “Muslim rage” is unconditional, and has little to do with particular events such as Israeli oppression of Palestinians or the American invasion of Iraq. It is an *essential* property of Islam when it does not dominate.

The argument does not accord with the facts of modern history (as detailed even in Bernard Lewis's own account), which show that there is no general “Islam” but a diversity of Muslims, many of whom adapted, coexisted and prospered in various combinations of power relations – ranging from a weakened and

modernising Ottoman empire to British colonial rule in India, to patterns of coexistence in Malaya and Africa.

When movements of self-determination arose in the 20th century, only a few (as, initially, in Algeria), took religious forms; most were secular and nationalist, and some (as in Egypt and the Levant) featured prominent participation by Christian co-nationals.

Almost a century later, it is possible to speak of a “rage of Islam”, one that is not general or essential but rather specific to a modern global conjuncture and to particular groups and sentiments. And this is where Iraq comes in.

A seductive “imaginary”

It is notable that the London bombers killed on 7 July and those arrested after 21 July are not Iraqi or Palestinian. The fact that some of them are of Pakistani descent is relevant, if at all, only for logistical reasons to do with the central role of that country in the international *jihadi* networks. The bombers are not otherwise driven by some element of Pakistani culture or heritage. Indeed, typically, radical *jihadis* disown the Islam of their parents as errant and corrupted, in contrast to their own pure faith.

Also notable is the participation of converts, the known cases being of Afro-Caribbean descent, and as such sharing alienation as inferiorised British citizens. These *jihadis* are avenging Palestinians and Iraqis on behalf of a universal Muslim community engaged in a global battle against non-believers who are oppressing Muslims; and not only Iraq and Palestine, but Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kashmir and Bosnia are fields of oppression of Muslims. So is the infidel military presence in the Arabian peninsula and other Islamic lands (the original cause advanced by Osama bin Laden for *jihad* against America and its Saudi hosts). So, Iraq is only one episode in this global battle.

The attacks of 9/11 in the United States predated the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and coincided with ongoing events in Palestine. All these episodes are, of course, pertinent to universal *jihad*, but only insofar as they confirm and corroborate the ideological “imaginary” of the war of Islam against the infidels.

It is rightly pointed out that only a small minority of Muslims are involved in these activities. There are indications, however, that many passive or moderate Muslims, some not even religious, do participate in

this “imaginary”: in sentiment, and maybe in token action such as money collections in mosques.

The Arab media are full of admiring and supporting voices of the acts of “martyrdom”, as well as mealy-mouthed regrets and “explanations” of such acts in terms of offensive western policies. 9/11 itself was greeted with open displays of delight in some quarters and quiet satisfaction in others (not only Muslim). Elements of the subsequent “war on terror” – most notably Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo – and the increasing pressure on Muslims in many western countries contribute to the siege mentality.

After the left, a gap

The idea of the division of the world into antagonistic religious communities is an old one, and not confined to Muslims. There have been pogroms of Jews in Tsarist Russia and elsewhere in Europe; the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Iberia; religious riots against Christians in Syria/Lebanon in the 19th century; massacres of Armenians in Turkey; the “ethnic cleansing” of Bosnians during the wars of ex-Yugoslavia. Many other violent episodes were fed by these ideas.

In a largely secularised 20th century these notions may have declined, but never disappeared. So, why did they come to the fore again in the last decades of that century? Many writers have focused on the theme of “political Islam” and tried to explain its rise, but even that brand of Islam is not uniform or unitary; it includes diverse forms, only some of which are violent.

One particular pertinent factor in the modern conjuncture is the decline of the left and of Marxism as an idiom of denunciation of capitalism and its injustices including racism, class oppression and imperialism. Opposition and action against imperialism, especially of United States militarism, was an important element of this leftist idiom. America and its allies targeted communist and leftist movements worldwide as part of the cold war, which added to the left’s popular credibility.

Nationalist movements, including Arab nationalism, veered towards a leftist idiom, as in Gamal Abdel Nasser’s “Arab socialism”, and the Ba’ath Arab Socialist Party, borrowing heavily from Marxist motifs and vocabulary. The failure of these movements, then the collapse of communism and the Soviet threat made these idioms increasingly redundant.

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In the process, and partly to fill the gap left by the failure of radical leftism, *jihadi* Islam became a world antagonist of America (while America retains many Muslim allies). This would explain its attraction to disenfranchised groups in the west, and conversion to it by individuals seeking action and redemption. It is interesting that many conversions occur in prison, where militant Islam appears to grant an honourable identity to the disenfranchised and despised: part of a world crusade against the arrogant infidel. For some it is worth dying for.

This dominance of militant Islam as the chief antagonist to the west in a “war of the worlds” would also explain its attraction to remnants of the old sectarian left. Maoists and Trotskyites show evidence of increasing sympathy for and even joint action with disaffected Muslims, as in the Respect party (widely regarded as a front organisation of the Socialist Workers Party) whose candidate George Galloway won the east London constituency of Bethnal Green & Bow in Britain’s May 2005 general election. There is no suggestion of the left’s complicity or sympathy with terrorist action; but the class struggle has acquired a religious tinge.

The Iraq factor

So, what of the initial question regarding the role of the Iraq episode in the bomb outrages in London? The

main contribution of Iraq is in reinforcing the ideological picture of the universal Islamic community doing battle with Christians and Jews. Withdrawal of British or American troops from Iraq would not alter that picture, nor diminish the momentum of martyrdom now established.

Such withdrawal may lead to a declaration of victory and brief respite, but there is always another cause in this universal struggle in a globalised world. We don’t know when this momentum will fizzle out: perhaps with the realisation that this *jihad* is doing nothing to alter the poverty, corruption and oppression in Muslim lands, or helping in the liberation of Palestinians (in fact the contrary: it provides international legitimacy for their oppression).

One element in Iraq, however, is highly pertinent to global *jihadism*. The invasion of the country has provided a fertile territory, a “failed state”, for recruitment and training of the cadres of *jihad*. The victims are overwhelmingly Iraqi, and many are the wrong kind of Muslim. Like most of their co-religionists around the world, they fall outside the *umma*, the imagined global community of Muslims.

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