

Antecedents of Islamic Political Radicalism Among Muslim Communities in Europe

Recent years have witnessed a rapid proliferation of radical Islamist activity in western Europe, from MI5's claim in 2006 of 30 incipient "terror plots" and 1,600 individuals under surveillance, to actual terrorist atrocities in European cities, the most infamous and deadly of which included the transport network bombings in Madrid in 2003 and in London in 2005. Concomitantly, both the media and the wider social discourse have been rife with self-appointed punditry and a plethora of commentators pontificating on European radical Islam's putative causal factors and remedies. This paper will attempt to address the complex issues by providing a fuller, more nuanced understanding of some of the causes and antecedents of Islamic political radicalism among western European Muslims.

The Role of Religion

A cursory reading of the biographies of many of the individuals implicated in terrorist acts points to one glaring, inescapable commonality; their political radicalization, culminating in terrorism is somehow inextricably linked to, or perhaps even contingent upon, the complex phenomenon of sudden or increasing religiosity. This in no way infers that an intensification in religious praxis or sentiment somehow results in a predilection for extremism and violence. Rather, the crux of the problem appears to lie with the misappropriation of religious labels for violent ends, which in itself is neither new nor confined to the Islamic tradition. Nevertheless, these are rendered moot points, for whatever the theological justification behind such actions (or perhaps a lack thereof) it remains an indelible sociological fact that these individuals considered themselves to be "true Muslims," and indeed Islam provided part of the *raison d'être* for their acts of terrorism.

The growth of religiosity, along with its concomitants, can perhaps be better understood within the broad interpretational framework of Transitional Religiosity Experiences (TRE), which encompasses five key motifs, namely adoption, intensification, transition, attenuation, and defection. In light of our current ambit, we will focus principally upon those motifs that signal a heightened state of religiosity, namely: (1) intensification—transitions from a state of

nominal or moderate to strong(er) adherence, commitment, or affiliation within the same religious tradition, e.g., those individuals who undergo born again experiences, or simply become more "practicing" as the process is referred to in the contemporary British Muslim idiom; and (2) adoption or transition—a move from no tradition or one tradition to another, e.g., conversion to Islam, or conversion within Islam (denominational switching—a move from one branch, sect or school to another). The change undergone may be sudden, entailing the contentious phenomenon of "snapping" or sudden personality change, identified by Conway and Siegelman's (1978) seminal study, but has a far greater propensity to be gradual, becoming manifest over prolonged periods of time (Buckser and Glazier 2003). These experiences are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and individuals may undergo multiple TREs throughout their lives, as is illustrated by the examples of Asif Hanif and Sajid Badat (Dodd et al. 2003; Johnson et al. 2003). Both cases reveal an initial, fairly gradual intensification experience during adolescence or early adulthood, which was then followed some years later by a secondary, quite sudden transition experience that resulted in or led to radicalization. This tentative pattern may in fact explicate the ubiquitous lag phase witnessed between a rise in religiosity and the manifestation of radical Islamist inclinations. To put it another way, increasing religiosity per se, particularly through intensification experiences, is unlikely to result in radicalization and often requires some further catalyst such as an abrupt transition experience.

The immediate consequences of TREs can be highly significant to the issue of potential radicalization, and relate principally to the two primary ways in which individuals choose to (re)construct their life narratives following the experience. The first paradigm does not engage in any level of polarization between the pre and post TRE phases of life; such cases maintain contextual continuity. Indeed, individuals adopting this viewpoint often fail to differentiate between life phases, choosing instead to view both as belonging to a continuum in which events transpire without fundamentally fracturing the overall life story. Although this first paradigm typically accounts for the vast majority of TREs in general, it is curiously absent from the experiences of radical Islamists and so of little relevance to our present study. Conversely, the second paradigm employs the TRE as a pivotal point in the narrative in order to construct a

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harsh dichotomy between the two life-phases, a process I refer to as contextual bifurcation. The past life and all that it entailed is now diametrically opposed to the present life. Indeed, the more severe the distinction between the two phases, the more likely the individual will be to consider the change wrought to be genuine and meaningful. Often the individual's recollection of pre-TRE life is marked by confusion and crisis that is then seemingly resolved through acceptance of a totalitarian vision of Islam, a system of unflinching moral absolutes. Indeed, anything that fails to conform to this perceived moral clarity (including other Islamic viewpoints) is to be shunned and condemned, and this perspective is facilitated by an almost Manichean separation of reality into good and evil, represented by the Islamic concepts of *halal* and *haram* respectively. This view is also typically characterized by the severing (or at least weakening) of familial and social networks, though the disavowal of parents, siblings, wives, and children, which also signifies a break with the past.

Antecedents of TREs

TREs do not occur in complete vacua, and in addition to substantive spiritual desires, yearnings, and experiences, are as much a product of ambient social, cultural, and political milieu, which therefore also need to be accorded credence as factors that are integral to this process. Consequently, a holistic understanding of the antecedents of TREs is central to the study.

There are numerous extraneous factors that can lead to a predisposition for TREs. Diverse socio-economic factors are most often-cited and typically include high levels of unemployment, poor job prospects, low educational attainment, a disproportionately high prison population, and poor housing facilities, compounded by the presence of endemic and often institutionalized racism and Islamophobia (Office for National Statistics 2003; Trades Union Congress 2005; Peach 2004; Strategy Unit 2003; Department for Education and Skills 2003; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2003). Indeed many of the biographies of radical Islamists point to an ambience of socio-economic deprivation. Some have suggested that terrorist acts can be viewed as an extreme variant of violent urban protest,¹ being deeply-rooted in years of cumulative deprivation, marginalization, and grievances against the British state (Farrar 2005). The joint report produced by the FCO and Home Office (2004) corroborates this finding by suggesting that the poor and jobless are considered to be particularly susceptible to exploitation and recruitment by extremists. Similarly, criminal activity also appears to be associated with a significant proportion of Islamists prior to their radicalization. Radicals such as Richard Reid, Mukhtar Said Ibrahim, and Mohammed Bouyeri are all thought to have developed strong Islamist views while in prison, which may suggest that the espousal of violent Jihadism may in fact constitute a form of recidivism that supplants more conventional modes of criminality.

Despite the presence of very real socio-economic deprivation in many of the areas from which radical Islamists hail, we must nevertheless contend with the striking incongruity that a significant proportion of these individuals were not particularly deprived or marginalized. Indeed, some attended private schools, were university graduates or working professionals. However, by focusing on individual circumstances and achievements, we not only do a great disservice to the genuinely impoverished communities from which they hailed, and which held a profound resonance for them, but we also fail to apprehend the communal nature of radical-Islamist discourse. Khan, in his posthumously released "martyrdom" testament, repeatedly invokes a communal identity in which he identifies the subjugation of "my people" and "my Muslim brothers and sisters" as being principle among his grievances.

Instead the one unifying thread among all these narratives is not necessarily poverty, but the complete divorce between all of these men and conventional political processes (Farrar 2005). Young Muslims can often experience a twofold disaffection, in which they experience exclusion from both mainstream politics and society, and from minority community politics (as alluded to later). Political impotence, such as that witnessed in the wake of unprecedented anti-war marches and demonstrations that nevertheless failed to avert the course of the Iraq war, can lead to disillusionment with democratic principles and processes,² as is illustrated by the examples of Hussain Osman or Mohammed Bouyeri. Potentially, this may result in a retreat to Islamism as advocated by groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, who decry the notion of democracy and positively reveled in the failure of conventional political activism in preventing the Iraq war.³

Identity Construction

One particularly significant antecedent of TREs appears to be the presence of unresolved issues vis-à-vis identity construction. For radical Islamists, the most salient elements of this contested identity construction may be considered to equate to the abstractions of majority culture (mainstream or host society), minority culture (ethnic or parental), and religion. Admittedly, this facile demarcation is in many ways specious, for none of these elements are diametrically opposed to one another, and there is considerable interaction and overlap between their spheres of influence. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that they may simply reinforce the validity of a Tabbat test or its trite post 7/7 equivalent, "are you British or Muslim?" iterated ad nauseam in the media recently, they do offer a convenient means of approaching the subject.

Minority Culture

For converts, the notion of an ethnic or minority culture may appear paradoxical, and although some converts may view parental culture in highly parochial terms that renders it discernible from a more general notion of mainstream culture, the vast majority will perceive an inevitable conflation between majority and minority cultures, rendering the latter term somewhat redundant. Conversely, minority culture has a far greater bearing upon identity constructions in the experiences of first generation migrants, for whom it occupies the position of majority culture prior to their migration. Their sentiments vis-à-vis minority culture are largely contingent upon the degree and duration of embedment within the said culture prior to displacement, and the underlying reasons for that displacement, i.e., whether or not the dislocation was voluntary. Subsequent to their displacement, their experiences often mirror those of the final grouping.

Second and subsequent generation members of migrant communities are much more ambivalent towards the notion of a minority culture. Those who choose to affirm its validity can do so in one of two main ways; they may construe their ethnic culture as a symbol of political mobilization and belonging (Song 2003). Others, however, retain identifications with parental culture through the atavistic expression of ethnic cultural components such as language, cuisine, dress, or music. However, even in cases where individuals attempt a nostalgic reconciliation with their roots, it typically entails the adoption of a distinctively diasporic expression of that culture (such as Asian hip-hop or Bhangra music), which may not necessarily be deemed authentic, nor grant cultural legitimacy.

However, the predominant paradigm for radical Islamists by far appears to be the staunch repudiation of one's minority culture and can occur for a variety of reasons. Individuals may deem the community and culture associated with parents to have

exerted a serious stultifying effect on their aspirations and prospects for the future. Consequently, a sense of powerlessness and a lack of self-determinism may ensue, which the individual perceives to be the result of excessively moralizing influences, overbearing familial control, and conservative social and sexual mores, which combined with inflated parental expectations and an unattainable study or work ethic, seek to stifle creativity, experimentation, and freedom of choice. The problem may be compounded further by the presence of tribal or clan-based power structures, epitomized by the South Asian *biraderi* and commensurable systems in other cultures, which can have the ostensive effect of divesting youth of any real tangible control over their own lives. The socio-political impotence that may be imposed by the *biraderi* was poignantly illustrated by the Labour “postal voting” fraud in Birmingham in the 2003 elections (Kennedy 2005; Akhtar 2003). A slew of reports following the “race riots” of 2001 in Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford, primarily involving young British Muslim men of South Asian descent, all drew attention to precisely this sort of cumulative marginalization of youth voices by decision-makers and community leaders (Cantle 2001; Clarke 2002; Ouseley 2002; Ritchie 2001; Denham 2002). More recently, the Home Office Report (2005) *Preventing Extremism Together Working Groups*, precipitated by the events of July 2005, also arrived at a similar conclusion.

The loss of minority culture may also correlate to a profound sense of alienation from one’s family and is often precipitated by a breakdown in communication, particularly with parents, who are therefore unlikely to be made privy to issues of utmost importance in their children’s lives. Indeed, in the numerous cases presented before us, none of the families appear to have been cognizant of the paths upon which their children were embarked, and for many, the disavowal of their children’s actions were preceded initially by vociferous doubts over their culpability, evincing a state of profound shock and denial.

One of the charges routinely leveled at minority culture by radical Islamists is that the traditions and customs associated with it seek to adulterate their pristine vision of Islam. This is hardly surprising, considering that prior to their TREs most individuals possess only a rudimentary grasp of their parental faith, which rarely extends to religious praxis of any sort. Consequently, when they do begin to tentatively explore their religious heritage, the discovery of “extraneous” material interjected into the Islamic canon can appear as something of a revelation, providing them with an authentic vehicle to forge an alternative Islamic identity to that bequeathed by parents (Lewis 1994; Roy 2004). The growing attraction of an austere Wahhabism or Salafism among diasporic Muslim youth that condemns many ethnic customs and norms as *bidah* (reprehensible religious innovation) is testament to this fact.

But perhaps the most damning indictment of minority culture for many radical Islamists is that it holds little or no relevance in the diaspora. There is no “myth of return,” no solace to be found in a nostalgic struggle for the homeland (or it is at least reframed in supra-national terms that renders its parochialism anachronistic), and ethnic languages become defunct through neglect while English assumes the role of lingua franca. Moreover, ambient cultural racism (Modood 2005) serves to negate any intrinsic worth thought to reside in ethnic traditions and customs, while concomitantly those very same traditions and customs are exposed as subverting authentic Islam. By virtue of this two-pronged attack, minority culture can effectively become obsolete.

Majority Culture

One of the more striking aspects of radical Islamism in the West is the degree to which its proponents are often ensconced

within the majority culture prior to their radicalization. Indeed biographies of many radical Islamists are rife with details alluding to an espousal of secular, Western lifestyles that are wholly appropriated from the host culture. Not only does the espousal of majority identities appear to be the norm, but often include elements that are anathema to their own minority cultural expectations and norms. Enculturation of this sort is perhaps to be expected of converts and second or subsequent generation British Muslims who, by virtue of being raised in a pervasively British environment, imbibe many of its values and cultural norms. However, even the more recent arrivals appear to have displayed a remarkably rapid embedment in majority culture.

The portrait then of many radical Islamists prior to their radicalization is one of comfortable immersion in popular, mainstream youth culture and laxity in religious praxis, but also, critically, retention of some vestige of minority cultural and religious identity. At best, such examples illustrate that an individual is particularly adept at traversing cultural spheres, however, at other times and points in the individual’s life (such as those induced by crisis, or changes in circumstances or commitment), it may also point to a cultural schizophrenia of sorts that cannot reasonably be sustained for any prolonged period of time. Identity is not a static construction and as self-categorization theory contends (Oakes et al. 1994; Turner et al. 1987). The self may be defined at different levels of abstraction depending upon differing circumstances; at times it may be in terms of individual uniqueness, while at others, in terms of specific group membership. The salience of a communal identity may, for example, arise during periods of perceived group crisis, evoked by events such as the Iraq war, the Palestinian Intifada, or the global war on terrorism. It is in these instances that individuals become more prone to reassessing what religious identity means to them, either as reconstruction in part of the lost minority identity or as a response to pressing questions and challenges from a pervasively non-Muslim environment. Moreover, this new interest in religion may also stem from a gradual disillusionment with majority culture, particularly in light of its perceived hedonism, rampant capitalism, and the general imposition of conflicting core value-systems from the host society, which may render the individual unwilling or unable to perpetuate assimilation into the predominant paradigm.

This leaves the individual in something of a quandary; a distinct lack of identification with both minority and majority cultures, as a result of being unable or unwilling to fulfill either group’s normative expectations, gives rise to a dual cultural alterity. In the absence of an appealing cultural paradigm from either group, the individual simply resorts to a cultural entrenchment that assumes a religious hue by default (due to a lack of viable alternatives), thus transforming religion from religion per se into an anchor of identity. Consequently, religion not only provides an emphatic rejoinder to Western identity, but is also interpreted *de novo*, without the perceived cultural accretions of the Islam associated with their parental or ethnic identity, thereby constructing a legitimate identity outside both minority and majority cultures.

Antecedents of Radicalization

As indicated earlier, TREs, including those that occur suddenly and entail contextual disjuncture of some form, do not imply, ipso facto, the presence of radical Islamist proclivities. Some individuals may even be drawn to the austere, puritanical forms of Salafism or Wahhabism (that provide the principle ideological basis for global jihadism), but nevertheless eschew violence of any form themselves. Clearly something beyond a simple TRE must transpire if an individual is to be drawn to radical Islamism. How then does one progress from a TRE to

Islamist-jihadist inclinations? A number of factors appear to be instrumental to this process.

A recent survey of Muslim students (FOSIS 2005) found that 83% were unhappy with British foreign policy, principally in Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan, and the alliance with the U.S.—all areas in which Muslims are perceived to be the victims of Western aggression and persecution. Within such a widespread sea of discontent, the presence of a small minority who may countenance the articulation of that discontent through violent means is eminently plausible. For these putative latent radicals, any new perceived provocation, such as the occupation of Iraq, or the lurid excesses witnessed at Guantanamo Bay or Abu Ghraib, may serve as a *casus belli* that sanctions the recourse to jihadism. The International Institute of Strategic Studies (2004) in its *Strategic Survey 2003/4* reported that the Iraq conflict had resulted in an acceleration of recruitment with up to 1,000 foreign jihadists having infiltrated Iraq, highlighting the role of political events in the incubation and catalysis of radicalism.

One of the potential consequences of socio-economic deprivation, political disaffection, and the gradual lack of identification with minority and majority cultures referred to earlier, is the manifestation of a state of anomie. This absence of values and standards, with the concomitant feelings of alienation and purposelessness, are not necessarily alleviated by the recourse to TREs. Instead, the individual turns to the espousal of radical Islamism, which serves as an emphatic rejoinder to the banality and inane humdrum of daily life. In its stead, this new worldview provides, perhaps for the first time, a sense of being part of an elite group that compensates for the shortcomings of one's own petty existence. Moreover, sacralized violence and ultimately martyrdom provide a conduit for these otherwise seemingly implacable feelings of dejection, with the individual spurred on by the vainglory of being included among the alumni of the *shuhadā* (martyrs).

Given the amorphous and egalitarian nature of Islamic ecclesiastical structures and the fluidity of its jurisprudence, the conspicuous absence of a clearly delineated religious hierarchy can also pose a serious problem (Hefner 2005). The problem is further compounded by the fact that the traditional *ulama* (religious scholars) are no longer considered to be the ultimate repositories for moral authority and guidance they once were. With the advent of globalization and an age of virtual fatwas,⁴ it can prove increasingly more difficult for the uninitiated to discern the authentic and eminently trustworthy from those who are not. It is in this context that we should seek to understand Shahzad Tanweer's adulation of Osama bin Laden, whom he considered to be "his personal hero" (McGrory and Hussain 2005). It is easy to understand why a figure like bin Laden, who strikes a compelling pose as the classic warrior-cleric, is considered eminently more trustworthy, more genuine, more rightly-guided than "mainstream" scholars, is perceived to be corrupted by complicity with and subservience to secular or despotic regimes. Indeed, his pariah status grants him autonomy from the political machinations, internecine conflicts and worldly affairs within which mainstream scholars are seen to be embroiled, granting him a potent legitimacy not based on scholarly erudition. This very same process that equates dissidence (against the state, Western hegemony, or secularism) with probity also grants legitimacy to notorious fringe scholars in Britain such as Omar Bakri Mohammed, Abu Hamza al-Masri, and Abu Qatada, who have been instrumental in at least some of the radicalizations witnessed.

Far more important than fringe scholars, is the self-radicalizing efficacy of the Internet, particularly on the growing phenomenon of jihadist web sites, forums, and blogs that provide not only the ideological treatises, and theological "evidences" underpinning the culture of jihad, but also the means through

which to carry it out. For a comprehensive account of the role of virtual jihadist media in radicalization, see Awan (2007).

One of the oft-overlooked aspects of radical Islamism is the degree to which humanistic aspirations underlie the changes in worldview associated with incipient radicalism. Empathy for fellow Muslims inculcate many potential radical Islamists with a sense of duty and justice, which finds effective expression through the conduit of jihadism. According to interrogators, would-be suicide bombers are always sincerely compassionate to those they see themselves as helping (Atran 2004)—a point corroborated by Durkheim's sociological taxonomy of suicide, through which "martyrdom operations" are also considered to be altruistic in nature (Durkheim 1897; Stack 2004). Pape's (2005) comprehensive study of suicide-terrorism reveals that suicide bombings are virtually always a liberation strategy in response to occupation that places the community over and above the self; that is why the occupied communities often call them martyrs and consider their actions to be altruistic.⁵ The notion of community here is expanded beyond its traditional ambit to that of the *Ummah* (the global community of believers), which is central to Islamist discourse, and indeed, the Islamo-jihadist movement's actions and rhetoric constantly, and rather shrewdly, invoke the specter of a global community.

It is easy to conflate all jihadist acts and actions under the singular rubric of terrorism, however, even among radical Islamists themselves there exist degrees of acceptability (see Haykel 2005). Causes associated with national struggles for independence against repressive regimes, such as those of Chechnya, Kashmir, and Palestine enjoy widespread sympathy and consequently have far greater legitimacy than for example, *khilafah* movements or the global jihadism of al-Qaeda. In the same way, conflict with military occupiers is not accorded the same inviolable taboo status as violence against civilian populations. It appears that many potential radicals, with romanticized and earnest, but largely inchoate notions of defending the *Ummah* and championing the cause of the oppressed, can have their (often laudable) empathies diverted (due to a lack of accessibility to the principle cause) or manipulated to deadly effect. They may not wish to participate in more controversial operations, however, by that point they have long crossed the Rubicon.

In other scenarios, there may be a gradual progression to increasingly more hardline radicalism that transcends the individual's initial largely humanistic aspirations. The small number of Britons who struck out to join the Iraqi insurgency (Leiken and Brooke 2005), which is viewed as a legitimate movement against Western occupation, just as earlier British Jihadists traveled to the theatres of conflict in Chechnya, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Bosnia before them (Taarnby 2004), will inevitably return to their host societies. These survivors, brutalized by the ravages of war and possibly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, may prove incapable of slipping back into mainstream society, and consequently may more easily resort to more extreme or taboo modes of violence.

The paths and motivations then to Islamic political radicalism among British Muslims are many and varied, with no simple cause and effect calculus appearing to be tenable. Rather, socio-economic deprivation and political disaffection potentially combined with the dual cultural alterity experienced by diasporic Muslims, can lead to an entrenchment that takes on a religious hue by default. In light of this deculturation, identification and loyalty is transferred from the majority and minority cultures to the *Ummah* exclusively. In times of group crisis (such as that imposed by perceived Western aggression), humanistic aspirations and a state of anomie may compel the individual to undertake altruistic violence in the hope of liberating his community (*Ummah*), and himself (from a banal existence), through his own sacrifice.

Notes

1. Such as the “race riots” of 2001 in Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford, or the more recent disturbances involving French youth in Paris and Lyon.
2. Conversely, the potent efficacy of the Madrid bombings in precipitating the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq serves to legitimize alternate means.
3. Hizb ut-Tahrir ran an intensive campaign in the run-up to the Invasion of Iraq, employing the slogan “Don’t Stop the War—Except through Islamic Politics.” See www.khilafah.com/home/category.php?DocumentID=6108&TagID=28.

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