



Columnists

A minority of extremists has been allowed to intimidate other Muslims

Burhan Wazir

Published at 12:00AM, July 14 2005

OF ALL THE evidence that demonstrates the confusion of the four hopelessly stupid British men who took their own lives, as well as the lives of more than fifty Londoners last Thursday, that provided by Jodie Reynolds, from Leeds, a neighbour of one of the bombers, was the most compelling. The young man's favourite song, she said, had been Elvis Presley's version of the Eddy Arnold classic, *Make the World Go Away*. "I just can't believe that young lad, with his whole life ahead of him, would carry a bomb on his back and get on a bus and blow himself up," said Ms Reynolds. "What on earth would have made him do it?"

Last summer, two and a half years and yet only a heartbeat away from September 11, I travelled around Britain researching a four-part series of articles chronicling the Muslim diaspora. In Stornoway, I found Muslims who, 40 years after moving to the Western Isles, had assumed all the tics and mannerisms of their hard-living hosts. In a mosque in Belfast, Iraqis and Iranians, men and women, were cowering in fear of daily racist attacks.

In Bradford, Sara Ali, a single mother, was struggling to rebuild the fabric of her family's life. Her son, Shazad, had recently emerged from jail after serving a three-year term for his role in the city's riots in July 2001. In Derby, a radical cleric preached hatred against the West. In the post-September 11 world, his rants sounded unexceptional: familiar to anyone who had visited Speakers' Corner. After the events of last Thursday, however, such hatred seems extraordinary.

During my travels, I found many Muslim communities, while often rubbing along in relative harmony with their neighbours, that seemed disturbed and unbalanced by forces within. In Luton, Akbar Dad Khan, an elderly pillar of the community, complained of local reluctance to challenge a small group of extremists. Just as white communities in Oldham had failed to confront members of the British National Party, parents in Luton, he said, had balked at challenging religious fanatics. "Some of these religious fanatics are our children," he said, bitterly. "Only, we've lost them. Even their parents feel intimidated by them."

This intimidation, in which a small minority of extremists — all death fetishists — exasperate and persecute a larger community, has been tolerated for too long. Such radical contempt for the views of the majority of Muslims surfaced in 1989 with the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*. The book-burning protests of that year can be seen as the precursors of last week's explosions.

The number of British Muslims who have joined Osama bin Laden's death cult, a movement that celebrates the destruction of every drive towards modernity, depressingly, has now hit double figures. As well as the four young men who brought such turmoil to London for much of last Thursday, there was Asif Hanif, 21, from London, who walked into Mike's Bar on the seafront in Tel Aviv in 2003. As he blew himself up, he killed two musicians, a waitress and injured more than forty bystanders. His accomplice, Omar Khan Sharif, 27, also acting for the Palestinian group Hamas, failed to detonate his bomb. His decomposed body turned up a week later floating in the sea near the bar.

Hanif and Sharif joined the growing list of British Muslims, all men, who have taken up jihad against the West. Idris Bazis, 41, a French-Algerian who lived in Manchester, is known to have blown himself up in an operation in Iraq this year. Last year, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, a public schoolboy from Wanstead, in East London, was sentenced to death in Pakistan for the kidnap and murder of the American journalist Daniel Pearl. Wail al-Dhaleai, 22, a Yemeni national who lived in Sheffield, travelled to Iraq in 2003 and died in a suicide attack on US troops.

Other members have failed in their attempts to "glorify" themselves. Richard Reid was jailed for life in 2003 for trying to explode a bomb on a plane bound from Paris to Miami. Another Briton, Saajid Badat, was sentenced to 13 years' jail this year after he abandoned a similar attempt.

In the 1970s, growing up in Glasgow, my generation was consumed by the most ordinary of passions: how to skip school; *Star Wars*; and excursions into the city centre. Middle-class in aspiration, but working-class by birth, my contemporaries slogged

through school and university to emerge, blinking and eager, into the workplace at the other end.

My travels around Britain last year, however, showed a worrying cultural shift: working-class parents and their children now pour scorn on the values of a British education, the building block for getting on in life. That shift mirrors what is happening throughout British society. I found teenagers who felt disconnected from the mainstream, choosing to live on the outer limits of their world. In Muslim communities such as those in Bradford, Luton and Belfast, young males seemed to revel in alienation. Rebellion is in the DNA of all teenagers and twentysomethings, but some young Muslim men express the outrage of youth in religious extremism, relishing ideological confrontation. They are by no means the majority, only more vocal than their peers.

However, the leap from being socially marginalised to becoming an Islamic bomber is impossible to comprehend. The four young men who have come to embody the British face of al-Qaeda emerged from quite ordinary backgrounds, not the backstreets of Gaza or slums of Baghdad.

But by their bloody actions, these four suicide bombers have undermined the few advances made in community relations since September 11. Having emerged from the wreckage of last Thursday's tragedy, Britain has never felt so disconnected from its Muslim communities.

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