

## London Bombs

The question has been asked all too often in the last few days. What possessed British born and bred young men to carry out cold-blooded calculated attacks on the innocent and diverse civilian population of London? Is it shocking that the men were in fact British and not foreign? Or was that to be expected in light of the visa restrictions that have become all too familiar for the sixteen to forty year-old Muslim male in the post 9/11 world?

As we search for answers where perhaps none exist, the word "Pakistan" is heard repeatedly. They trained abroad, we are told. They were brainwashed in *madrassas*, or religious schools in Pakistan. Mohammed Siddique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer and Hasib Hussain all visited Pakistan shortly before the attacks were carried out. But so do thousands of other Britons who have relatives and friends in Pakistan. And how do we explain Jermaine Lindsey, the man who carried out the most devastating attack of all? Did he have any link whatsoever to Pakistan? Do we simply need a scapegoat? Is it comforting to shift the blame abroad only so we can feel safer in Europe?

Difficult as it is to swallow, we need to identify the bombers for what they were. If boxing champion Aamir Khan and cricket legend Nassir Hussain are British, then so unfortunately are the bombers. The children of immigrant parents are just as likely to turn out good or bad as their English neighbours. If we are to truly prevent such attacks from happening in the future and get to the bottom of this menace then ownership is the first step.

Just as suicide attacks have become an international phenomenon, not attributable to any one country, so the nationalities of the attackers are equally global. Instead of focusing on the amount of time any bomber may have spent in any foreign country, perhaps the more relevant and far more difficult to answer question may be: what is it about British society that led to this atrocity?

As a relatively recent arrival to the United Kingdom, I am often surprised at the rigidity with which Islamic societies and mosques in Britain operate. Simply tuning into the Islam channel on television, one is shocked at the intolerant and misogynistic attitude prevalent. Islam is explained as different from western freedoms, different from democracy, different even from capitalism. A woman without a scarf covering her hair is regarded as only quasi-Muslim. Refreshingly, the Pakistani and Arabic channels beamed on Sky feature well-groomed men and women discussing issues of relevance to the modern world, vying for legal and social reform, confronting even problems as taboo as diseases plaguing sex workers.

In Britain however such enlightened conversations are not only unthinkable but often summarily dismissed as vestiges of western influence. Here, Islam is not thought of as the religion that it is meant to be, but as an identity. An identity

moreover that is diametrically different from the morally corrupt west that surrounds it. A reaction perhaps to years of racial tension and Paki-bashing that the parents of these teenagers suffered but were too scared to speak out against. A reaction more recently to the “shock and awe” campaign in Iraq and Afghanistan led by America and followed only too earnestly by Britain.

Not that ethnically-motivated discrimination or bad foreign policy can ever be a justification for the heinous crimes of the bombers. But certainly it can be a partial explanation. To ignore it or to refuse to recognize it would only result in a myopic view of the situation which could at worst result in further alienation of the minority community, and more troublingly, further attacks. We cannot preach multiculturalism and yet omit to take into account the sentiments of the largest ethnic community in our midst.

Equally, the Muslims of Britain cannot continue to live in the west and mock what it represents. Genuine efforts must be made to strengthen our institutions so that they are compatible with our environment, more open and more tolerant, not just towards non-Muslim but also towards women. We need to revert to the basics of Islam, to its essences, wherein lies the beauty of the religion. Islam is so flexible at its core that it is perfectly possible to be a good Muslim without ever stepping into a mosque. In that sense, it is far less communal a religion than many others.

Muslims come in all shapes, sizes and colours. One billion strong it is perhaps impossible for them to be monolithic but the time has come to open the doors of *ijma* and *ijtihad*, of re-thinking our priorities, and to remember the Koranic verse where God says that “he has created us in nations and tribes, so that we may love each other, and not so we may hate each other.”