

July 22, 2005

Why Do They Hate Us? Not Because of Iraq

By OLIVIER ROY

Paris

WHILE yesterday's explosions on London's subway and bus lines were thankfully far less serious than those of two weeks ago, they will lead many to raise a troubling question: has Britain (and Spain as well) been "punished" by Al Qaeda for participating in the American-led military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan? While this is a reasonable line of thinking, it presupposes the answer to a broader and more pertinent question: Are the roots of Islamic terrorism in the Middle Eastern conflicts?

If the answer is yes, the solution is simple to formulate, although not to achieve: leave Afghanistan and Iraq, solve the Israel-Palestine conflict. But if the answer is no, as I suspect it is, we should look deeper into the radicalization of young, Westernized Muslims.

Conflicts in the Middle East have a tremendous impact on Muslim public opinion worldwide. In justifying its terrorist attacks by referring to Iraq, Al Qaeda is looking for popularity or at least legitimacy among Muslims. But many of the terrorist group's statements, actions and non-actions indicate that this is largely propaganda, and that Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine are hardly the motivating factors behind its global jihad.

First, let's consider the chronology. The Americans went to Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11, not before. Mohamed Atta and the other pilots were not driven by Iraq or Afghanistan. Were they then driven by the plight of the Palestinians? It seems unlikely. After all, the attack was plotted well before the second intifada began in September 2000, at a time of relative optimism in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Another motivating factor, we are told, was the presence of "infidel" troops in Islam's holy lands. Yes, Osama Bin Laden was reported to be upset when the Saudi royal family allowed Western troops into the kingdom before the Persian Gulf war. But Mr. bin Laden was by that time a veteran fighter committed to global jihad.

He and the other members of the first generation of Al Qaeda left the Middle East to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980's. Except for the smallish Egyptian faction led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, now Mr. bin Laden's chief deputy, these militants were not involved in Middle Eastern politics. Abdullah Azzam, Mr. bin Laden's mentor, gave up supporting the Palestinian Liberation Organization long before his death in 1989 because he felt that to fight for a localized political cause was to forsake the real jihad, which he felt should be international and religious in character.

From the beginning, Al Qaeda's fighters were global jihadists, and their favored battlegrounds have been outside the Middle East: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and Kashmir. For them, every conflict is simply a part of the Western encroachment on the Muslim ummah, the worldwide community of believers.

Second, if the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine are at the core of the radicalization, why are there virtually no Afghans, Iraqis or Palestinians among the terrorists? Rather, the bombers are mostly from the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, Egypt and Pakistan - or they are Western-born converts to Islam. Why would a Pakistani or a Spaniard be more angry than an Afghan about American troops in Afghanistan? It is precisely because they do not care about Afghanistan as such, but see the United States involvement there as part of a global phenomenon of cultural domination.

What was true for the first generation of Al Qaeda is also relevant for the present generation: even if these young men are from Middle Eastern or South Asian families, they are for the most part Westernized Muslims living or even born in Europe who turn to radical Islam. Moreover, converts are to be found in almost every Qaeda cell: they did not turn fundamentalist because of Iraq, but because they felt excluded from Western society (this is especially true of the many converts from the Caribbean islands, both in Britain and France). "Born again" or converts, they are rebels looking for a cause. They find it in the dream of a virtual, universal ummah, the same way the ultraleftists of the 1970's (the Baader-Meinhof Gang, the Italian Red Brigades) cast their terrorist actions in the name of the "world proletariat" and "Revolution" without really caring about what would happen after.

It is also interesting to note that none of the Islamic terrorists captured so far had been active in any legitimate antiwar movements or even in organized political support for the people they claim to be fighting for. They don't distribute leaflets or collect money for hospitals and schools. They do not have a rational strategy to push for the interests of the Iraqi or Palestinian people.

Even their calls for the withdrawal of the European troops from Iraq ring false. After all, the Spanish police have foiled terrorist attempts in Madrid even since the government withdrew its forces. Western-based radicals strike where they are living, not where they are instructed to or where it will have the greatest political effect on behalf of their nominal causes.

The Western-based Islamic terrorists are not the militant vanguard of the Muslim community; they are a lost generation, unmoored from traditional societies and cultures, frustrated by a Western society that does not meet their expectations. And their vision of a global ummah is both a mirror of and a form of revenge against the globalization that has made them what they are.

Olivier Roy, a professor at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, is the author of "Globalized Islam"