

The Changing Face of Salafi-Jihadi Movements in the United Kingdom

By James Brandon

A SERIES OF ATTEMPTED Islamic terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom since the July 7, 2005 London bombings seem, at first glance, to suggest that Britain's Salafi-jihadi networks—once among the most sophisticated in Europe—have survived government crackdowns largely unscathed. In particular, one group's attempt to detonate two car bombs in central London and then attack Glasgow airport in June 2007 appears to indicate that the threat of further jihadist attacks remain high.¹ Other plots allegedly prevented by police include separate attempts to kidnap and kill off-duty Muslim soldiers in the British army² and to explode bombs on a number of trans-Atlantic flights.³ Behind this apparent swell of jihadist activity, however, government initiatives have significantly disrupted militant networks, and jihadist ideologies are coming under increasingly effective theological attack from Muslims in Britain and abroad.

Government Crackdown

Before the 2005 London bombings, high-profile radicals from the Middle East—often Saudi-educated and/or veterans of jihadist violence—controlled mosques and held rallies in central London, while their supporters openly ran publishing houses and websites and forged close links with foreign militant groups to whom they could channel funds and volunteers. Since 2005, the United Kingdom has jailed the most prominent of these preachers, such as Abu Hamza al-Masri, an Egyptian veteran of Afghanistan's anti-Soviet jihad, and Abu Qatada, a Jordanian sometimes known as Usama bin Ladin's spiritual leader in Europe. Other radical preachers such as Omar Bakri Muhammad and Shaykh Abdullah Feisal have left the United Kingdom. Others again, such as Saad al-Faqih

and Mohammad al-Massari, both linked to al-Qa`ida through their opposition to the Saudi government in the early 1990s, now restrict their activities to Arabic language media and websites to avoid deportation to their home countries. Other leading Islamists—most notably Rashid al-Ghanoushi and Ali al-Bayanouni, the respective leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia and Syria—have similarly been allowed to remain in the United Kingdom as long as they do not incite or plan violence.

In a further attempt to remove extremists' platforms, radical mosques—such as Abu Hamza's mosque in Finsbury Park in north London—have been put in the hands of more moderate preachers and pro-jihadist websites shut down. In addition, groups funneling volunteers and money to jihadist groups in South Asia and the Middle East have been broken up, while the security services have proven themselves increasingly able to penetrate cells preparing terrorist attacks.

Evolution of Jihadist Networks

While the government's actions have made radical Islam less visible in the United Kingdom—especially compared to the “Londonistan” era of the late 1990s—there are signs that this calm may be deceptive. Jihadist groups worldwide are notable for their willingness to adapt to changing circumstances, and those in the United Kingdom are no exception.

Increasingly, evidence suggests that a younger generation of preachers who sympathize with al-Qa`ida are presently adapting to the UK's decreasing tolerance for Islamic radicalism by operating covertly, avoiding open clashes with the authorities and spurning the national media. Typically, such preachers—often born and bred in the United Kingdom—operate in small mosques, community centers and houses, frequently on the fringes of large towns. They will also use more prominent locations, such as sympathetic Islamic societies in universities, if such opportunities arise. These developments are largely in keeping with widespread predictions that any post-July 7 crackdown would fragment the jihadist movement and push it underground.

These lower profile figures have a greater ability to escape detection than

their media-hungry predecessors. For example, Usman “Uzi” Ali, a former member of al-Muhajiroun, Omar Bakri's pro-jihadist group, who has claimed to have helped British volunteers join the Taliban in 2001, preached pro-jihadist sermons for several years at an obscure mosque in Woolwich, East London, leaving only after the mosque's trustees won a £30,000 court case to expel him.⁴ Soon afterward, Ali was appointed Muslim chaplain to the nearby state-funded Queen Elizabeth Hospital before being fired after Muslim patients complained about his anti-Western sermons.⁵ He now organizes prayers and meetings in gyms and community centers in East London and has told his followers that he aims to establish after-hours religious schools for their children to counter the “un-Islamic” teachings of mainstream schools and mosques.⁶ Although arrested on at least one occasion, he has not been prosecuted for any terrorism-related offenses.

Supporters of jihadist ideologies who run their own mosques have also found ways to continue spreading pro-jihadist teachings while avoiding prosecution. For example, in Luton, a town 30 miles north of London with a large Pakistani population, one mosque has apparently circumvented laws against incitement by using child imams who cannot be prosecuted as they are below the legal age of responsibility. In autumn 2007, one such child imam lectured worshippers on the injustices suffered by Muslims held in prison on anti-terror laws before calling on the congregation to “resist” the British government.⁷

Veteran Muslim Brotherhood members have similarly continued to incite their followers while carefully skirting anti-terror laws. For instance, Azzam Tamimi, a prominent defender of Hamas and a Muslim Brotherhood member, told an anti-Israel rally in London's Trafalgar Square on July 10, 2006 that “if they don't want peace, we have another language—and we have every

1 David Leppard, “Britain Under Attack as Bombers Strike at Airport,” *The Times* [London], July 1, 2007.

2 David Byers, “Soldier Kidnap Terror Plot: Six Charged,” *The Times*, February 9, 2007.

3 Adam Fresco, “Eleven Charged over Transatlantic Bomb Plot,” *TimesOnline*, August 21, 2006.

4 Personal interview, eyewitness, London, January 2008.

5 “Extremist Was Hospital Chaplain,” BBC, September 20, 2007.

6 Personal interview, eyewitness, London, November 2007.

7 Personal interview, eyewitness, London, October 2007.

right to use that language.”⁸ In some universities, radical Salafist preachers have similarly exploited traditions of tolerance and freedom of speech. For example, a Friday sermon given to hundreds of Muslims on the campus of Imperial College University in London in autumn 2007 reportedly ended in prayers for the “victory of the mujahidin everywhere in the world.”⁹

Challenges to Pro-Jihadist Ideologies

Although many Salafi-jihadi preachers have adapted to anti-terrorism measures, there are signs that many British Muslims are becoming more willing to tackle extremist preachers. During the 1980s and 1990s, British Salafi-jihadis enjoyed a free reign to promote their ideology as the most authentic form of Islamic practice and to present violence and martyrdom as the greatest acts of faith. Since then, jihadist ideologies have come under increasing attack. The most damaging attacks are those which have come from within the Salafist tradition.

Since the summer of 2007, one of the most prominent British opponents of the jihadist worldview has been Maajid Nawaz, a former member of the leadership council of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), a global group that wants to restore the caliphate. HT has been accused of radicalizing several British jihadists, most notably Omar Sharif, a British student who attempted to carry out a suicide bombing in Israel in April 2003. Nawaz has begun a theological refutation of HT’s ideology, publicizing his views through mainstream media as well as to all Muslim audiences. In many cases, the vitriolic responses to his arguments suggest that his ideas are often perceived as dangerous not only to Islamism, but even to the Islamic faith as a whole.

Other damaging attacks on al-Qa`ida’s ideology have come from former jihadists. Usama Hasan, an imam who runs a prominent Salafist mosque in Leyton in East London, is typical. In 1990, Hasan traveled to Afghanistan where he received military training and briefly fought against the country’s

communist government. After returning to the United Kingdom, he was heavily involved in radical Salafist activism; for example, he wrote influential critiques of “pacifists” such as Hamza Yusuf, a U.S.-based cleric.¹⁰ Today, Hasan preaches religious tolerance and integration at his mosque to a traditionalist Salafist congregation, which averages 800-1,000 strong on Fridays. “Usually if someone speaks against extremism, people say that he’s a government agent but with those of us who were in Afghanistan they can’t say that to us,” he said.¹¹

Such indigenous refutations of jihadist ideas augment similar criticisms made by Salafists abroad. The latest of these is by Sayyid Imam `Abd al-`Aziz Imam al-Sharif (also known as Dr. Fadl), the former spiritual leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad presently imprisoned in Egypt, who recently wrote that Muslims who have an agreement or contract with a non-Muslim state (e.g. who have received a European visa or citizenship) are forbidden from attacking its citizens there.¹² His thesis has been swiftly attacked by British-based Salafists who perceive such critiques as a threat. In December 2007, for example, Tariq Ramadan, a prominent supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, told students at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies that al-Sharif’s ideas were invalid because people held in Egyptian prisons “will say anything.”¹³

For many British Muslims, however, such critics of jihadism are increasingly being vindicated by setbacks suffered by jihadist movements in Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Strategic errors by al-Qa`ida—most notably its decision to target Iraqi civilians—have also done considerable damage to the jihadist cause and have boosted those who question the group’s Islamic legitimacy.

Conclusion

Salafi-jihadi networks in Britain have changed significantly since the 2005 London bombings. Yet, while there are signs that jihadist ideologies are losing ground to less violent forms of Islam, this process remains fragile. Any perceived victories for jihadist movements in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia or elsewhere at this critical time will likely greatly strengthen British radicals and could badly undermine Muslim attempts to challenge jihadist theologies—underscoring how U.S. success in Iraq and elsewhere remains critical to defeating Islamic extremism globally.

In addition, because Britain’s Muslims are disproportionately poor, young and unskilled, they remain vulnerable to extremist ideologies. Socio-economic factors do not directly cause jihadist violence, but they allow radical preachers to convince British Muslims to locate themselves within the global Muslim sense of victimhood and to believe that their situation can only be addressed through violence. Furthermore, the growing political savvy of the next generation of jihadist preachers poses new challenges to the United Kingdom’s security services—especially as the fragmentation and dispersal of radical networks makes potentially militant individuals harder to monitor. Together, these and other factors ensure that British-based Salafi-jihadi movements—even if declining in strength and influence—will continue to threaten the United Kingdom for years to come.

James Brandon is a senior research fellow at the Centre for Social Cohesion in London. He is a former journalist who has reported on Islamic movements in Europe, the Middle East and Africa for a wide variety of print and broadcast media. He has a MA in Middle Eastern Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

8 Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zh6q02J6dJk.

9 Personal interview, eyewitness, London, November 2007.

10 Usama Hasan, “Recapturing Islam from the Pacifists,” available on various websites, November 14, 2001.

11 Personal interview, Usama Hasan, Masjid al-Tawhid, Leyton, East London, December 28, 2007.

12 Jarret Brachman, “Leading Egyptian Jihadist Sayyid Imam Renounces Violence,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:1 (2008).

13 Lecture by Tariq Ramadan, “Introduction to Islam and Islamism,” SOAS Middle East Society, November 17, 2007.