
Why Mehdi Hasan is half right and half wrong on foreign policy as a cause of terrorism

Uncomfortable though it might be, it is entirely conceivable the Woolwich attack was motivated by both an unwise, unsustainable and unjust foreign policy, and the beliefs predominant within minority elements of British Sunni Islam, namely Salafi-Jihadis.

Mehdi Hasan's article "Extremists point to Western foreign policy to explain their acts. Why do we ignore them?" contains both an appealing, and an uncomfortable message. Firstly for those wedded to interventionist positions, be it in Iraq and Afghanistan, or several of the foreign policy choices that have faced the coalition, the argument is discomfiting. A traditional principle of government is to provide for the security of its citizens. If intervening in Muslim majority countries, or reflexively supporting the United States or Israel undermines this, surely the Prime Minister has a duty to reconsider such policies?

There is little evidence such an approach is likely. David Cameron's response to the In Amenas siege in Algeria was to talk of an existential struggle against terrorism that may last a generation, to pledge some supporting elements to France's intervention in Mali, but to deny a parliamentary debate on the subject as British boots were not on the ground in the country. Such actions made a mockery of the democratic beliefs he claims to be upholding.

Mehdi Hasan's arguments are also, in some quarters, very appealing. Britain's many Muslim representative organisations have long complained of a political discourse that equates Islam per se with terrorism. Academic research of our print media in particular demonstrates the volume of negative media stories about Muslims. Both the British National Party and English Defence League sought to arrest declining influence post-Woolwich with rallies, whilst in several towns arrests were made after attacks on mosques. The response of many on the left – from the Morning Star, Stop the War Coalition to Unite Against Fascism, has been to describe Woolwich as 'the inevitable price of the war on terror', and, after briefly condemning the murder, to quickly move on to concentrating solely on their original campaigns.

In such an atmosphere, many will miss the nuanced nature of Mehdi Hasan's argument, which does not seek to blame all of our terrorist trends on our foreign policy, but does locate much of the blame there. This needs to not only be debated, but placed in significantly more context.

Woolwich in Context

We are now in the third decade of what may be referred to as British Jihadism – the involvement of a small, but not insignificant number of British Sunni Muslims (perhaps best described as Salafi-Jihadists) in armed struggle and/or bombings. These actors have appeared in areas as diverse as Bosnia, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, Israel, Iraq, Somalia, Sweden, Kenya, Libya and Syria, not forgetting attempts to blow up airliners flying to north America. At some stage, probably beginning with the jihadist plot uncovered in Birmingham in 2000, but occurring increasingly significantly after 2003, the UK was added to this list of combat zones.

The Iraq invasion, as former head of MI5 Eliza Manningham-Buller states, sent domestic terrorist plots off the Richter scale. But it is worth stressing how distinct these plots were. Iraq is a mostly Shia country, Shia are estimated to comprise anything from 10-15% of the UK Muslim population, yet they do not tend to appear in our terrorism arrests. Nor do other Muslim minorities – the Ismaili section of Shi'ism or the Ahmadiyya's seem immune to such trends. The hurt of our foreign policy was felt most onerously by certain, but by no means all, Salafis.

These plots tended to focus on the mass killing of civilians – something delivered on 7/7, but something that failed with, for example, the botched bombing of the Tiger Tiger bar in 2007. If Woolwich was different it is that rather than targeting a transport interchange or large venue selling alcohol, an off duty soldier was chosen, and civilians left to go about their business. Whether this reflects debates within Jihadist circles, and the wider estrangement killing civilians brought Al Qaeda from its base, remains to be seen.

Home and Away With Al-Muhajiroun

Following Woolwich, significant attention has again been focused on individuals around the over-interviewed Anjem Choudary. At least one of the alleged attackers, Michael Adebolajo, had publicly moved in these circles. Often referred to as al-Muhajiroun (even though this group was disbanded in 2004 and subsequently banned under the Terrorism Act) these activists have long provided a heady mixture of vigorous condemnation of British foreign policy with a politico-religious platform that centres around Islam having the answer to all the United Kingdom's problems be they spiritual, legal, political, economic or ethical.

This duality is also displayed in terms of nomenclature. After al-Muhajiroun (the exiles, a reference to the Prophet and his companions being exiled to Medina from Mecca) – replacement names have included Muslims Against Crusades, Islam4UK, not to mention front groups such as the London School of Sharia. This translates into group activity combining these two poles – provocative anti-war stunts such as poppy burning and booing returning soldiers, or dawah stalls to convert non-believers to Islam, usually but not always in inner London.

Somewhat curiously a visit to the Home Office's list of proscribed terrorist organisations finds al-Muhajiroun listed, not as a domestic terrorist group, but an international one. Its supporters have allegedly been responsible for something like a fifth of Islamist terrorist plots in the UK, and many of its members were born within sound of Bow Bells. One of its best known, Anthony Small, is a former British Light Middleweight boxing champion. What is so international about it?

When I challenged the Home Office about categorisation, via the Freedom of Information Act, I received a very woolly response that its focus was international because it campaigns for a caliphate. In this area at least, the government seems determined to have an international, rather than domestic focus.

There is much more to come out about Woolwich, but the snippets we have of the attackers' invocations to Allah, followed by a desire to be filmed denouncing British policies in Muslim lands, are entirely consistent with al-Muhajiroun's trajectory over many years.

The closing of debate

For some on the left, making reference to problematic trends within domestic Islam remains a no-no. Some anti-fascist organisations have grasped this nettle – the anarchists of Antifa were probably

first, whilst the anti-fascist organisation Hope Not Hate, under the leadership of Nick Lowles, has returned to this subject repeatedly.

This remains a step too far for some on the revolutionary left, and broader organisations such as Unite against Fascism or the Stop the War Coalition. Here a condemnation of an attack such as Woolwich (or Toulouse, or 7/7) is quickly followed by a pivot into either opposition to the EDL/BNP or broader critiques of Western foreign policy. The Jihadists are then forgotten about, until the formula is repeated the next time. And the next.

The Broader Problems

It is entirely possible to imagine a Britain with a non-interventionist, quietist foreign policy, and yet still wrestling with some of the difficult minority strands in British Islam. Is it because of foreign policy that earnest young men in Tower Hamlets proclaimed gay free zones earlier this year to try to enforce, even for a few hours, their version of sharia? How do we explain the practice of segregated meetings being held by some Muslims at universities, often in defiance of clear guidance to the contrary by the host institutions?

In some neighbouring countries it is not foreign policy but perceived or actual insults to Islam that have provoked the jihadists – to attempted murder in the case of Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, murder in the Holland of Theo van Gogh. But we do not have to look abroad for politico-religious violence – in 2008 the publishers Gibson Square was firebombed for planning to publish a novel about the Prophet’s child bride. In 2010 RE teacher Gary Smith was battered for the ‘crime’ of teaching about Islam when he was not a Muslim. These actions, which combine a hypersensitivity to the practices of democratic society with a desire for sharia, right here, right now, are unlikely to dissipate quickly. If fighting for the Jihadist cause abroad is still going strong after three decades, why should fighting for these ideals at home end any quicker?

It is entirely conceivable the Woolwich attack was motivated by both an unwise, unsustainable and unjust foreign policy, and the beliefs predominant within minority elements of British Sunni Islam, namely Salafi-Jihadis. That is an uncomfortable message – to those in government, those who oppose its foreign policy, and to Muslim representative organisations. But unless we open up debate on these issues, this society is guaranteed to experience groundhog day, not just in further terrorist attacks, but in the debates that follow them.

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