

Preventing Islamist Terrorism

The time has come to discuss, and considering implementing, the argument made by Karl Popper that we should claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. How do we stop young men and women from becoming jihadist terrorists? A depressing new incident on June 13, 2015 involving a native British Muslim has ignited painful discussion as well as anxiety in the UK.

The incident concerned a 17-year-old teenager, Talha Asmal, a very good A level student in Dewsbury, near Leeds, in West Yorkshire. He left his hometown to go to Turkey, then to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS). He took part in the attack that killed 11 people by detonating a vehicle filled with explosives near an oil refinery south of Baiji, Iraq. Asmal is Britain's youngest suicide bomber, two years younger than another Islamist teenager from West Yorkshire who was killed during the attack on a London bus on July 7, 2005.

The town of Dewsbury is now regarded as one of the UK's centers of Islamist extremism. It was the home of notorious terrorist Mohammad Sidique Khan, who on July 7, 2005 bombed the London underground station Edgware Road, killing himself and five others. The neighboring town of Bradford in Yorkshire on June 17, 2015 also saw the departure of three local women and their nine children to go to Syria and fight for IS.

Why would Asmal and Khan, and like-minded young Muslims, become terrorists? Why would young women take themselves and their children to fight for IS? The question of why they become jihadists defies rational explanation. The more than 2000 Muslims who have left Britain were not socially deprived, since many came from middle class or aspiring families. In the Yorkshire areas where they lived, and where there is a substantial number of Muslims, they did not suffer from any kind of "Islamophobia." They were not deprived of educational

opportunities since they seem to have done well at school. They were apparently not students of mainstream Islam. For them, the paradox is that they have joined IS, a group that is fighting other Muslims in Syria and Iraq.

Some of those vocal in the anti-Western blame game, offer the explanation that the foreign policy of the United States and of European nations is responsible. Two factors are present. The first, an issue of course that is currently disrupting U.S. presidential politics, is the U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Irrespective of the answers given by presidential contenders, a specious explanation is that it was the Western intervention in these two countries that radicalized the Muslim youngsters.

The second particular factor is the De-Ba'athification policy, the removal of all influence of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party in the Iraqi political system. The American diplomat Paul Bremer, when he was administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority of Iraq, introduced the policy in May 2003. That policy led to 400,000 members of the Iraqi army being barred from government employment and from receiving pensions, though they were able to keep guns. The policy was rescinded a year later, but was continued by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki who barred Ba'athists from taking part in the parliamentary elections. Some argue that this was responsible for the deteriorating security situation. Many of these former Iraqi military officers who had been in the Iraqi intelligence agency now work for the IS security service.

Britain, like other Western countries, is now disturbed both by the increasing number of youngsters, born in Britain, joining the IS and by the likelihood of some of the jihadists returning home and becoming involved in local terrorists acts.

It is worth exploring current thinking on how to deal with both the initial inducement of the young to fight for IS and the problem if they return to their home area.

Britain has taken the lead in presenting ideas to counter extremist views and terrorist actions. The objective is not only a concern with violent extremism but also with non-violent extremism that may create support for terrorist activity.

This takes a number of forms. It is assumed that Islamic leaders, like the rest of society, are concerned not only by the intrinsic appeal of jihadism, but also by the fact that many in the Muslim community either condone or acquiesce in it.

This argument was forcibly made by Shalid Malik, a Labour Party politician, British born of Pakistani descent, who in fact was Member of Parliament for Dewsbury for a number of years. In July 2005 he said that British Muslims must confront the voices of Islamist evil. After the Asmal incident, Malik in June 2015 said that Muslims must defeat the Islamic State in mosques and communities across the country: "It's a struggle that can only succeed if it is one which is led by Muslims themselves."

A stronger case has been made by British political leaders, primarily Theresa May, Home Secretary since 2010, and by Lord Carlile, former government reviewer of anti-terrorism legislation. Both stress the need for a Prevent Program, a counterterrorism strategy. Such a program is essentially based on challenging extremist ideas and terrorist actions, and stopping the influence of jihadist influence.

Counterterrorism could take many forms, government authorities working with both mainstream media and educational groups and businesses and Muslim organizations to prevent extremism and to draw attention to the evils stemming from that extremism. Though it is obviously controversial, since it infringes on the question of free speech, an important concern must be with the Internet. The Western democracies should use computer programs, to provide a counternarrative, using the same tools,

the same thought processes that have radicalized youngsters, to counter Islamist online propaganda.

There is now abundant evidence that the major factor attracting youngsters to join the jihadist cause has been the Internet. A starting point would be to prevent extreme Islamist imams from preaching their hatred messages, and to counter that extremism in mosques, schools, and publications. Moderate Muslims should join in this effort.

The issue must be confronted of whether the Internet should be obliged to reveal Islamist information that may be harmful to security. Human rights groups as well as mainstream media should share in dealing with this increasing important topic and with publicizing the nature of the evil perpetrated by jihadists so that people become aware of it and find jihadist violence less attractive. Regarding those who have been attracted by IS, it is worth discussing whether democratic countries should block the return of those who have gone to fight for IS. Evidently, no Western security force has the resources to provide surveillance of all those suspected of support for terrorism, either before their departure to join IS or if they were allowed to return. Extremism must be prevented in both cases.

First published in the