

## The Educated Terrorist

That terrorists are often highly educated people with engineering or medical qualifications should come as no surprise because, as Debora MacKenzie wrote in a recent article in openDemocracy - a substantial number of perpetrators of terrorism are products of a scientific education.

In some given circumstances, such as during the War of Liberation, educated people are prepared to take an active role, and such a person might be more likely to try something desperate. Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist with the Foreign Policy Research Institute and author of (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) *Understanding Terror Networks* studied 400 al-Qaida operatives. Some 300 were professionals. And they were from well-off families, "the best and the brightest." The facts are indeed interesting.

As people say, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, we have seen that in the past they have more often than not been educated people. But, she says, the London-Glasgow events may tell us something about a certain kind of terrorist - beyond the fact that a particular combination of elements (injustice, ideology and political motivation among them) can come together in an individual person's decision to help pack a car with a clumsy heap of propane canisters, petrol and nails and seek to ignite it in public places where hundreds of citizens are gathered. Yet when it emerged that trained medical practitioners were involved in the failed terror attacks in London and Glasgow on 29-30 June 2007, people were shocked.

The popular image we have in our heads of those who take up small arms for a cause is influenced by the experience of nationalist or anti-colonial struggles. But many of those involved in the new transnational terrorism of al-Qaida and related groups, are far from the products of slums or backwoods religious schools and are instead well-off, educated people, often with roots in Africa or Asia, but who have typically lived - and become radicalised - in the west. Indeed, the data from a number of sociological studies indicate that university-trained people in scientifically-allied professions such as medicine and engineering punch well above their demographic weight in radical circles.

But you may argue, doctors are pledged to save life, not take it and the idea that protectors of life might be perpetrators of death cuts deep into our souls and does not fit in with true and tried image of a doctor adhered to the Hippocratic oath. Yet we know there have been doctors who have cheerfully put their patients to death without a qualm.

Peter Bergen of the New America Foundation, examined the backgrounds of the seventy-nine people behind five major attacks: the World Trade Centre attack in New York (1993), the east African embassy bombings (1998), 9/11, Bali (2002), and London (2005). Of the sixty-three whose education was known, two-thirds had been to university, half in the west. Four of the total had, or were working on, doctorates. The largest group had studied engineering; the next most popular field was medicine. Seema Chishti of the Indian Express thinks that while technical training may attract the best and the brightest in developing countries, it fails them by not following through with the spirit as well as the letter of their chosen degree subject. She said, the educated acquire the tools of technology, but not the Enlightenment thinking that goes with it.

The leading scholar of Islamic history and ideas Malise Ruthven argued in openDemocracy soon after 9/11 ("Cultural Schizophrenia", 27 September 2001) that there are a disproportionate number of scientifically trained people in fundamentalist movements because they are less critical of simplistic religious messages, as technical specialisation tends to discourage critical thinking. However, this may say more about attitudes to knowledge and class than about the factors that shape terrorist activity but there are certainly different styles of thinking in the two cultures."

Malise Ruthven notes the "schizophrenia" experienced by people who work with scientific principles while living a pre-scientific mindset. Other writers have seen fundamentalism as stemming from the severe unease experienced by people making the transition between traditional life based on received authority, communal identity and stability, and modern life based on complexly changing evidence, urban plurality and the notion of progress. This, too, must be part of the answer to the question of whether scientific training predispose to terrorism. Sometimes, yes, if the person comes from a background where a sudden immersion in modern thinking is disorienting and painful. And it is science and engineering students who are often thrown in most acutely at the deep end of this transition.

01 AUG 2007

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