Report

The Rise of ISIS and Islamophobia in the UK

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Muslims attend Friday prayers on a rainy first day of Ramadan in East London [Reuters]

Abstract

The massacre of 38 tourists on a beach in Sousse on 26 June 2015 sent shockwaves around Europe, bringing the threat of militant groups operating in North Africa ever closer to home. However, given that the majority of the dead were British, the atrocity had a special resonance in the United Kingdom, stoking fears of a possible ISIS attack on British soil. The massacre also prompted renewed questions about Britain's own Muslim communities and provoked an outpouring of anti-Muslim sentiment in some parts of the British media, reflecting a general growing unease in the UK about its Muslim population. Indeed, the emergence of ISIS has been accompanied by a tangible rise in anti-Muslim prejudice in the UK, with Muslims being called upon to come forward and condemn extremism as though they are somehow guilty by association of their faith alone. However, it is at the policy level that the response to the growth of ISIS is perhaps most concerning. New counter terrorism legislation introduced by the British government in 2015 has brought in invasive new surveillance measures across Britain's public sector, injecting a suspicion about Muslims into every part of public life. All this is serving to make many Muslims in the UK feel increasingly as though they are a community under siege.

Introduction

The massacre of 38 tourists, the majority of them British, on a beach in Sousse on 26 June 2015 sent shockwaves around Europe. Although the presence of militant elements in North Africa, including those linked to ISIS, had long been an issue of concern in many European capitals, this attack was on a whole new scale and for the British at least brought the dangers even closer to home. News that the gunman had trained in Libya also highlighted ongoing concerns about the growth of an ISIS presence there, fuelling

fears that North Africa could serve as ISIS's gateway to Europe. For many in Europe, therefore, ISIS had never felt so close or so threatening.

While the initial reaction in the British media to the Tunisia attacks was to focus on the details of the massacre itself, it was not long before things turned inwards to Britain's own Muslim population and inevitably to fears of the extremism 'lurking within'. Some of the commentary was shrill in its anti-Muslim sentiment. Three days after the attacks, British columnist Leo McKinstry accused "all too many Muslims" in Europe of supporting the "theocratic goals" of groups like ISIS, al-Qaeda and Boko Haram and of yearning for "the triumph of their creed."[1] He warned too of the consequences of uncontrolled immigration and soaring birth rates among Britain's Muslims, too many of whom, he attested, had failed to integrate, accusing Britain's authorities of allowing the import of "alien obscenities" such as the burka, sharia courts, tribal corruption and "the systematic abuse of white girls."[2] Indeed, McKinstry's analysis linked not only the twin bogeymen of Islamist militancy and uncontrolled migration, but also issues of integration with terrorism. While a lack of integration may well contribute to feelings of marginalisation, which in turn can fuel radicalisation, simplifying such complex issues is hardly helpful in understanding why a minority of young Muslims turn to violence.

Yet this kind of commentary is indicative of a deeply concerning trend developing in the UK in which it is becoming increasingly acceptable to talk about Muslims in disparaging terms. Well-known commentator Matthew Parris has observed, "Something dangerous is brewing beneath the surface in our country.... I hadn't expected to live to see a powerful generalised antipathy against any race or religion gather popular force here without stirring at least the more liberal of my fellow citizens into resistance."[3] Parris also recounts how some of his newspaper columns have elicited views that are "hateful towards Muslims, all Muslims, and hateful towards those of us who don't share the antipathy."[4] Although the Internet and social networking sites have long provided space for vile abuse of all kinds, these fora have provided particular outlets for individuals to express anti-Muslim prejudice.

The ready expression of such sentiment reflects a more generalised sense of unease about Muslims in Britain that has accompanied the rise of ISIS in the Middle East and North Africa. Just days before the Sousse attacks a poll of 6,640 people in the UK carried out by YouGov asked which three words or phrases respondents most associated with the term 'Muslim'. Shockingly, 12% chose "terror/terrorist/terrorism", coming ahead of all other terms including mosque (9%) and Quran (8%).[5]

This poll came on the back of another recent survey which found that 57% of non-Muslims believed that Muslims were not doing enough to integrate into British society.[6] It also found that one third of Muslims felt they had experienced greater hostility and

believed they were under greater suspicion in the last few years, while 44% of non-Muslims reported being more wary of Muslims. Another YouGov poll found that out of 1,641 British adults surveyed, 55% believed there was a "fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society."(7)

Hate Crimes in the UK

Hate crimes against Muslims in the UK have also risen and according to monitoring groups have spiked in direct response to attacks carried out by ISIS. The Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks (TellMAMA) group reported that following the killing of British aid worker David Haines by ISIS, it received reports of 39 hate incidents in three days.(8) A similar pattern is emerging in France where according to the Collective Against Islamophobia in France, there has been a 23.5% rise in Islamophobic attacks since the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January.(9) TellMAMA also found that there is a direct correlation between ISIS activities and the language of abuse suffered by Muslims. As Director Fiyaz Mughal explained, "We know that after the beheading of Alan Henning there was a correlating background noise with the ongoing language of hate. For example, we have an incident of a man saying to a Muslim woman 'I am going to behead you'….. Syria is creating a constant reinforcement of key terms like extreme, terrorist, jihadi and beheading."(10)

What is perhaps more concerning about all this is that this growing sense of anti-Muslim prejudice is being reinforced at the political level where Muslim communities are increasingly being treated as a security issue. In particular, there have been growing calls on Muslims in the UK to speak up and speak out against terrorism as if they have a particular responsibility to do so by virtue of their faith alone. British Prime Minister David Cameron told British Muslims in the aftermath of the Tunisian attacks, "these people are taking your religion of peace and they are perverting it. And that's the reason for standing up and saying 'you must not do this. This is not what we believe, this is not what we're about'."(11) His sentiments have been echoed by the media with The Telegraph demanding, "This poisonous ideology has to be denounced at every turn – in schools, in the home and in the mosques."(12) Such calls have left many Muslims feeling as though they are a community under siege, relentlessly having to defend themselves and their faith against atrocities that have nothing to do with them and that have in most cases been committed thousands of miles away.

Yet the British government has taken things even further. If Muslims were not already being made to feel as though they are some kind of fifth column - terminology employed by some far right French officials about Muslims in France following the Charlie Hebdo attacks - then the UK government's latest anti-terrorism legislation will surely make them feel as such. The 2015 Counter Terrorism and Security Act not only gives the UK

the right to seize travel documents and issue temporary exclusion orders, it also legalises invasive mass surveillance measures unprecedented in peacetime.

The 2015 Counter Terrorism and Security Act

This law places a statutory duty on a host of public institutions and organisations to "prevent people from being drawn into terrorism."(13) It obliges staff in organisations ranging from universities to schools to hospitals and local councils to monitor and spot signs of radicalisation among those members of the public they come into contact with. Local councils, for example, are obliged to assess the risk of individuals being drawn into both "violent extremism and non-violent extremism, which can create an atmosphere conducive to terrorism" and to develop an action plan accordingly. Healthcare providers, meanwhile, are tasked with ensuring that "where there are signs that someone has been or is being drawn into terrorism, the healthcare worker is trained to recognise those signs correctly and is aware of and can locate available support."

What is especially astonishing about this Act, however, is that the duty to prevent radicalisation extends not only to schools but to nursery and pre-school settings as well. The idea that nursery workers across the UK are to be trained to spot signs of radicalisation in children as young as two is absurd to say the least. Equally ridiculous is the fact that the list of organisations is so detailed it even places a statutory duty to prevent radicalisation on providers of "disabled holiday schemes." Indeed, the Act has the feel of the kind of draconian surveillance regime dreamed up by a police state rather than a democracy.

Unsurprisingly, this law has provoked an angry response among some of the sectors expected to comply. Hundreds of university professors issued a statement expressing concern that the "unnecessary and ill-conceived" bill would place "an unlawful and unenforceable duty on educational institutions and staff" and risked compromising academic freedom.(14) Even Eliza Manningham Buller, the former head of British intelligence agency MI5, said she was unable to back the terror measures on the grounds that they were potentially in conflict with universities' existing obligations to protect free speech.(15)

Furthermore, it is not clear how such legislation is to be implemented. Although the Act calls for training to be given, how one should expect pressurised frontline staff, most of whom have no knowledge or understanding of Islam let alone more militant interpretations of it, to spot when an individual is becoming radicalised is unclear. The problems of implementation were certainly apparent when Education Secretary Nicky Morgan was asked to give an example of a sign that a pupil was being radicalised. Morgan, who initially voted against gay marriage herself, responded by stating that

making homophobic comments could be an indication of such.(16) The ludicrousness of her comments highlights the very real difficulties of this law and raise serious questions about its potential effectiveness.

Beyond this, and the erosion of civil liberties that this Act entails, the government's approach is problematic for a host of reasons. Firstly, it forces those working in the very public institutions that should form the glue of community life to take on a policing and surveillance role. Secondly, the Act risks stifling free speech and debate in the very places they are most needed. To make young Muslims afraid to express views and ask questions about ISIS, British foreign policy or what the Act refers to as "British values" for fear of being construed as extremist would be a travesty of the principles that are meant to underpin the British education system.

Most important of all, however, this Act risks further stigmatising and alienating Muslims. It implicitly treats Muslims as though they are a separate community, different to everyone else, and requiring special and particular monitoring. Indeed, it injects a basic suspicion about Muslims into every part of public life. As one commentator describes, "Making Muslims feel like a fifth column, a potential enemy within, from childhood onwards: this is guaranteed to make British Muslims feel even more besieged and defensive."(17) It also treats Muslims in the UK as if they are a monolithic unit and a single community which is inherently extreme.

Conclusion

The irony of all this is that fostering such differences and feeling of alienation among British Muslims risks playing straight into the hands of groups like ISIS. Rather than making Muslims feel as though they are a community apart and under siege, a more robust response to the challenges of terrorism would surely be to emphasise what we have in common: the shared values that are human values rather than those labelled as 'British' or 'Muslim'.

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