

# Homegrown terrorism 1: We must slay the mythical dragons of "Eurabia"



Europe has a long history of homegrown terrorism, says **Muhammad Abdul Bari** of the Muslim Council of Britain, even if today's concerns centre on a handful of European Muslims claiming to act in the name of Islam. He examines the narratives that are doing the most damage

The phenomenon of homegrown terrorism is not unique to either my faith or my community. Our continent has a long history of it, from the right-wing French Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS) that opposed Algerian independence through to the Basque separatists, the Irish republicans and Italy's Red Army Brigades. We were right to worry about all of them, just as we were right to deal with them politically once they renounced arms.

Nevertheless, today's concern centres on a handful of people who claim both to be Muslim and act in the name of Islam. As a conscientious citizen and as a human being, I understand the real and valid worries people have about peace, safety and security. It is our responsibility to protect these social values. Part of that responsibility, however, is to ensure we analyse the problem correctly so that we can find the most appropriate and effective solution.

Within my own community in Britain, my concern turns to anguish when terrorist

acts are carried out in the name of Islam, even though such heinous actions have no basis in the faith. And yes, I worry about the very real possibility of young people in my community degrading themselves to such a level as to become perpetrators of these un-Islamic acts.

As Muslims, we have unreservedly spoken out against this perversion of our faith. There is no Islamic basis to what we witnessed in Madrid, London or anywhere else where there is indiscriminate murder. We persistently remind ourselves of the Qur'anic edict – "If anyone kills a human being .... it should be looked upon as though he had slain all mankind, and if anyone saves a life it should be regarded as though he had saved the lives of all mankind."(5:32)

Terrorism is against religion and outside religion, despite those who claim otherwise. Muslims everywhere have tried to repudiate these assertions and worked hard to dissuade from violence those who choose to go down

this futile path. Our best defence is found within the traditions of our faith and the higher principles of justice and humanity embedded in it. From within the Muslim community, we have seen initiatives that aim to tackle this issue from the inside.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) has since 9/11 reminded its affiliated bodies to work with the authorities in reporting terrorist acts, and engage with young people who are susceptible to what we call a "militant fringe" within the community. Bodies like the MCB, or Islamic initiatives like the 2004 Amman Message of tolerance or the Topkapi Declaration in 2006, have brought together the diversity of traditions within Islam to provide a common platform to speak out against terrorism. No serious scholar of Islam has ever praised or validated acts of nihilism.

Yet we are told that condemnation and community action is not enough. Today there exists a powerful narrative that presents startling assertions of how large swathes of young European Muslims are susceptible to terrorism, how the very faith of Islam leads to radicalisation and how Muslims, because of their creed, choose to live in ghettos and therefore create swamps from which terrorists feed. The most extreme form of this narrative is found in the idea of "Eurabia", an incendiary term that purportedly describes a phenomenon where Muslim hordes have already breached fortress Europe and are now contaminating Europe's very DNA. From this narrative, the fear of homegrown terrorism resonates the most, as does the impetus to deal with Muslims as a foreign foe who must

be treated harshly. So too does the idea that accommodating religious differences is dangerous. A false dichotomy is created in which Muslims must choose between a western and European identity or a supposedly separate Islamic identity.

These notions are given currency in the media, when isolated Muslim stories are reported as regular occurrences and polls are cited out of context. Three examples come to mind. The first is the riots of 2005/06 in French inner-cities that were described as a Muslim issue, when in fact the events were a symptom of social alienation and economic deprivation.

The second was the hysteria generated in Britain not long ago around the Archbishop of Canterbury's thoughtful interventions on the role of the Shariah. These were somehow translated into the belief that western values were succumbing to foreign Islamic ones, whereas in fact all he had sought was to promote debate on the role of faith in public life.

The third example is the citation of polls, often out of context, to illustrate how Muslims in Europe are separatists. An ICM poll in Britain in 2006 suggested that 40% of British Muslims wanted the introduction of Shariah law. There was, of course, no mention of the nuances. Muslims – like those from the Jewish faith – requested parity in certain aspects of family law and where Shariah law was already in place in some parts of the British financial system.

The relationship between a European Muslim's faith, his or her creed and the

identification towards his or her European nation is much more complex. Seldom does it conform to the stereotype constructed by the Eurabia thesis. A wide ranging global Gallup study that has culminated in the book "Who Speaks for Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think" by John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed includes detailed and sophisticated analysis of European Muslims' attitudes. Muslims living in Paris, London and Berlin are more religious

than the general public, and at the same time just as likely as the general public to identify strongly with their nation and its democratic institutions, and just as likely to reject violence. Simply put, Muslims reflect the prevailing status quo with regard to loyalty to their nation and its democracy, and in rejecting violence. The results suggest that religious and national identities are complimentary not competing concepts.



## MATTERS OF OPINION

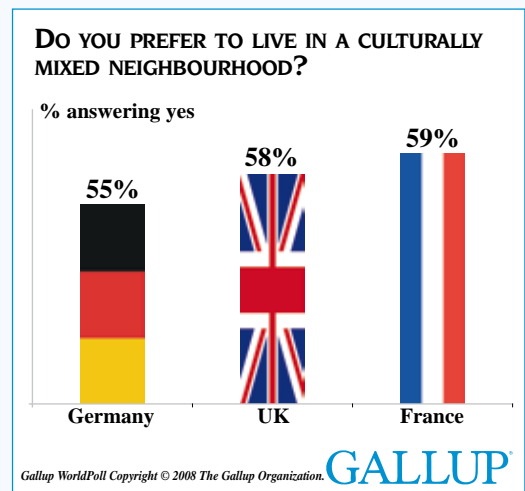
### Minority groups enrich cultural life, say British public

UK media reports often suggest a creeping Islamophobia, but a Gallup survey of British public opinion suggests the contrary. Three out of four Britons questioned said that they did not believe their way of life was threatened by people with other religious beliefs.

The survey, in late 2006 and early 2007, showed 22% agreeing with a statement saying that people of different faiths threatened their way of life; while three-quarters of Britons questioned disagreed. Among Londoners, there was even less support, with 20% agreeing and 77% disagreeing.

A second question, relating to the impact of minority groups on cultural life, also found broad recognition of their positive contribution. Over two-thirds of Britons (68%) agreed that people from minority groups enriched the cultural life of their country. In London, support for the statement was markedly stronger, with 78% supporting the notion.

Further polls conducted around the same period in France, Germany and the UK, found that the majority of people would prefer to live in a neighbourhood with a mix of ethnic and religious backgrounds rather than one mostly made up people sharing their own background.



The phenomenon described as homegrown terrorism when seen through the prism of Europe's Muslim communities must therefore be placed in its correct context. We need to bring greater perspective to our analysis, without any of the cynicism that emanates from those who are warning against the mythical dragons of Eurabia.

For our subsequent responses to be effective, our analysis must be well thought out, measured and one which involves European Muslims without alienating them or casting them out as suspect and foreign. The terrorism we have faced since 9/11 requires a collective response and a recognition of its globalised nature.

A good place to start is an examination of the youth alienation that exists amongst all our communities. Social problems persist, and for young Muslims there is a double bind of discrimination, coping with multiple identities and being singled out as ripe recruits of terrorism. The tools of youth culture are on the one hand global, but on the other fragmented, disparate and catering to those alienated by mainstream society.

The prevailing narrative often speaks of mosques and Islamic associations as creating spaces for radicalisation, but I would contend that some young people are actively turning away from these very peaceful institutions. This may be because

they are finding it difficult to compete with the promises of solace available through the internet, where voices can address political issues, feed off injustices around the world, and launch calls to arms that can ultimately be murderous. The internet is where some young Muslims have succumbed to an alluring narrative of Islam as constructed by those behind 9/11 and 7/7. We also

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know that the devastating impact of the internet on handfuls of young people is not confined to the Muslim community, as evidenced by the tragic events in Bridgend in the UK where 17 young people, seemingly connected through the internet, all committed suicide.

For some young Muslims, the paramount sub-culture is virtual and it operates on the fringes of Muslim communities, whether in Europe or in the Islamic

world. The story presented is of a world beset by very real injustices, for which the only viable solution is violent action that will supposedly lead to the victory of a monolithic Muslim world. Never mind the inconvenient truth that the acts may be theologically impermissible, the ends justify the means and there really is no alternative.

Such a narrative is appealing because it feeds into the alienation faced by young Muslims. Some may look to unjust foreign adventures in Iraq – despite the wishes of the common people to the contrary – as examples

of the futility of political action. Others cannot help a sense of suffocation at the prevailing and toxic discourse which casts European Muslims as foreign, alien and suspect. Laws enacted to single out and "persecute" Muslims, and statements that affirm the Islamophobia of our media, go some way towards buttressing the absurd notion that what we are really witnessing is a "war on Islam".

In Muslim communities everywhere, there is a need to challenge this narrative, for example by making known more loudly the theological repudiation of violence. Furthermore, in the face of the despair that engulfs us with the media's relentless cynicism, we must redouble our efforts to reach out in local communities and demonstrate the realities of our faith. Thus one should pay tribute to the resilience of Dutch Muslims who are currently resisting the provocations of right-wing politician Geert Wilders, who is bent on releasing a film that can only inflame public prejudice against Islam. Muslims in The Netherlands are responding by opening up their mosques and reaching out to neighbours, and European Muslims should also persuade their young of the long-term value of reaching out to their fellow man.

But beyond the community there is a collective responsibility to treat such problems not as Muslim ones, but ones whose solutions will enhance the very values on which European society is based. Addressing the sense of injustice, siege and alienation faced by young Muslims is not a victory for the extremists. Rather it is a victory for European liberal values because it clearly demonstrates that every individual and every minority is of equal worth.

Just as we should not see the phenomenon of homegrown terrorism as being new to Europe, we should not consider the presence of Muslims as new to Europe and European culture. Islam's interaction with European society sparked a flowering of knowledge. Large numbers of Muslims have inhabited the Balkans and eastern and central Europe for hundreds of years. They helped rebuild the economies of war-torn Europe in the 1950s, arriving as immigrants and then making Europe their home. In almost every field of life, Muslims have been an integral part of the European tapestry. Muslims are today at home in Europe, have been contributors to its past and are stakeholders in its future.

All Europeans, including those who are Muslims, are right to worry about the issue of homegrown terrorism, just as they are right to worry about climate change or the credit crunch. Our right to security and life is paramount, as is the need to inhabit a space free of prejudice and suspicion. The 7/7 bombings in 2005 in my home city of London brought this into sharp relief. The victims were of all faiths and races, including Muslims, as were the heroes who helped London get back on her feet again so quickly. The collective message that came from all Londoners after 7/7 was decisive – we will not allow such atrocities to divide us. □

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