We should have known
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The four bombs that ripped through London's transport system on July 7, 2005 not only killed at least fifty-four people and injured 700 more; they also tore away a series of comforting illusions. Although London was long predicted to be a terrorist target and the security services claimed to have foiled at least four and perhaps as many as eight previous attempts, public opinion had increasingly assumed that the only threat came from the mythical and vast conspiracy, beloved of politicians and the tabloids – together with some of the broadsheets – al-Qa'ida and that effective controls of migrants and tourists would protect it. The stunning success of the security services at uncovering the identities of the bombers, however, has made it clear how threadbare such views were and how ineffective the concomitant "war on terror" has been over the past four years at ensuring security in Europe. The four young men responsible were not only Europe's first suicide bombers; at least three of them were also British citizens, born and raised in the Pakistani community in Yorkshire.

The background
In retrospect, of course, we should have known, for all the pointers were there. As far back as the attacks on Washington and New York on September 11, 2001 it has been clear that the protagonists came from alienated migrant communities in Europe. Then it was a group of students in Hamburg, later in Strasbourg with the abortive attempt to bomb the Christmas market there in 2002, it was Algerians from the migrant communities and, of course, in March 2004 in Madrid, it was Moroccans who had lived in Spain for many years. In Holland, later on in 2004, it was a young Moroccan – a Dutch national – who ritualistically murdered the film director, Theo van Gough, because of his provocative film on gender issues in Islam. In Britain, however, the predominant Muslim community does not come from North Africa but from South Asia. Yet individuals of Pakistani origin, even if born and educated in Britain, have not been strangers to such actions. In 2003, two Britons from such a background joined Hamas in the Occupied Territories as recruits for suicide bombings. One achieved his goal; the other was later washed up dead on a Tel Aviv beach.

In other words, it has long been evident that the real ideational substratum from which contemporary terrorism emerges is the progressive alienation of Europe's Muslim youth. The vast majority of those involved are below the age of thirty – in London, one suicide bomber was only nineteen years old and another only eighteen – and come from a wide range of minority groups, whether as temporary residents, as students, as permanent residents from ethnic minority communities or, indeed, as European citizens, whether originally Muslim or converts to Islam – one of the London bombers was originally Jamaican and Christian. Nor is such a pattern new; such alienated and frustrated groups of youth have been engaged in terrorism in Europe since the 1970s, alongside Europe's other home-grown terrorist traditions, whether nationalist or ideological in inspiration.

ETA and the IRA may not have inspired quite such a degree of fear, but for many decades they have been all-pervasive in Spain and Britain. Germany and Italy, and to a lesser extent Belgium and France, suffered the depredations of Bader-Meinhoff, the Red Brigades and the Revolutionary Communist Cells in the 1960s and 1970s. Nor, indeed, have terrorist groups from the Middle East and North Africa always been inspired by

Islam; in the 1980s Middle Eastern conflict linked to the Arab-Israeli dispute spilled over into European streets. It was only after the Islamic revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and after the civil war began in Algeria at the start of the 1990s that the theme of Islam began to appear as a justification for terrorist violence.

Politics and Islam
Islam, in itself, then cannot be a sole or even an adequate explanation for the violence we confront today, whatever our politicians tell us and however terrorists manipulate its doctrines to justify their actions. It is true that its political effects have been global in ways that did not exist before, but this may reflect far more the nature of security in a post-Cold War world which itself is global in extent. Hegemonic stability through the sole hyper-power and its allies is all-pervasive, whether in economic or political terms and, inevitably, the response to it will be too. And since hegemonic stability effectively means that states are coerced or induced into acquiescence, it is hardly surprising that non-state actors have come to dominate the security scene. Nor, indeed, since most of the arenas of confrontation are to be found in the Muslim world – Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq alongside economic and political failure, to mention the most obvious – is it surprising that the rhetoric of violence should choose a culturally acceptable and authentic medium.

Yet the process of confrontation is a political act, not a statement of ideological difference nor a reflection of a moral hierarchy. It deals with very concrete issues which have not been resolved for decades and in which the West, led by the United States, has shown itself partial and biased. We rarely reflect on the consequences of policy; the losses amongst civilians in Palestine or Iraq, the manifest injustices of the sanctions regimes in Iraq, Iran or Libya, or the repressive viciousness of regimes that we espouse, for the sake of stability of oil supply, in the Middle East, for instance. Muslims, Middle Easterners and North Africans do and it makes them very angry as political partiality envenoms their lives, denying them the very benefits we promise through globalisation and democracy.

It is in that contradiction that the crux of terrorism lies and it is our failure to understand this and to respond to it that promotes their anger, however expressed. And the crux of the problem is political, not ideological, although ideology derived from Islam legitimises the anger and the acts that flow from it. Indeed, that anger has been codifying itself for many years; ever since Sayyid Qutb was sent on a teacher-training course to the United States in the 1950s. It was there that he contemplated the moral degradation of the West and feared its import into the Middle East. But it was Western policy in the Middle East that led to the adoption of political Islam as the rhetoric of struggle after Arab nationalism failed the course. And it was our endorsement of such a rhetoric to confront the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, alongside the evident success of the Islamic revolution in Iran that led to its popularisation and its adoption as the idiom of struggle in the 1980s. Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida merely globalised the rhetoric and rendered the ideological opposition absolute, in a perverse variant of Huntington's "clash of civilisations" – and, after September 11, 2001, the West, led by the Bush administration for its own ideological reasons, accepted the terms in which they portrayed the struggle.

None of that, however, alters the primordial fact that the substance, as opposed to the rhetoric, of contemporary terrorism is profoundly political. The suicide bombers in

London, no less that their colleagues in Pakistan and Afghanistan, are concerned about political issues. They do not want to destroy Western values and extend Islam into the universal religion, whatever they may feel about the moral superiority of Muslim values. They want to see the West leave them alone – in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. They want to see an end to regimes that oppress them with Western help and they do not believe Condoleeza Rice when she admits that the United States erred in its regional policy for sixty years by choosing stability over democracy. They know that the hunger for oil and gas and Western preference for Israeli objectives will continue to condition Western policy, whatever diplomatic rhetoric may claim.

The solution

Ironically enough, the intrinsically political nature of the confrontation that has developed since 2001 provides the key to its solution, once the ideological baggage of the war on terror is abandoned. It lies, as it always did, in separating the extremists from their socio-political environment, as has always been the case in Europe. Political extremism only survives and proliferates if it enjoys popular support, as Mao Tse Tung knew so well. And that separation requires bifurcated policies; those that address the manifestations of violence and those that address its causes. Once again, there is nothing new in this; it has been the essence of asymmetric warfare since the end of the Second World War, whether in Malaysia, Kenya or Europe. Symptomatic treatment, the argument behind the "war on terror", merely makes the problem worse for it intensifies the confrontation and forces those not directly involved to make choices, thus encouraging them to endorse the objectives of those resisting Western power, itself seen as aggressive and repressive.

The first step, apart from the obvious prophylactic measures of tracking down those responsible for specific acts for their criminality and dismantling the networks that support them, is to understand why they do what they do and what they really wish to achieve. With the London bombers, we need to understand how apparently normal youths could become immersed in political extremism and the religious doctrines that legitimise it. Youth is absolutist in the causes it espouses and individuals from the Muslim minority have an acute awareness of the imbalance of forces inside the Islamic world, as well as the suffering of civilians there. And Western policies that appear to be undiscriminating in their negative effects, whether in Iraq or Palestine, merely extend the field of those prepared to tolerate terrorist violence, even if they do not actively espouse it, simply because they see no way of changing Western mindsets.

Extremist political Islam does offer an explanation for apparent persecution and a prescription to counter it – and is easily accessible, whether in the madrassas of Pakistan or on the worldwide web. But it is not the inevitable catalyst leading from anger to action. That appears to be provided by the fact that those who become involved in a conspiracy of terrorist violence have known each other and have been friends long before, so that emulation becomes a powerful driver for incorporation into the conspiracy. It merely needs an outside hand to canalise the anger and frustration towards the salafi-jihadi paradigm for it to become the all-encompassing explanation and prescription. It is at that point that isolated cells of inchoate anger become weapons directed at specific targets. The catalyst, then, can be the extremist imam or the more sinister recruiter, as occurred with the September 11, 2001 bombers. Only then is such a group inculcated into real violence.

The response has to be to understand how such groups form and what the individual propensities towards such behaviour might be – effective intelligence, in other words, that allows terrorist conspiracies to be isolated. There are wider social implications, too, clearly minority communities need to be encouraged not to tolerate political or religious extremism and to learn to understand and interact with angry and frustrated youth. But this is only part of the response for another element is to demonstrate that the state can show restraint. It must punish criminals but it must not persecute groups in an attempt to anticipate crime. It must, in short, preserve the rule of law and not subvert it, as virtually all European states are doing, by securitising the legal process. It must avoid the knee-jerk reactions beloved of politicians when they claim that the moral integrity of Western civilisation and its values are under threat. That, perhaps, is a counsel of perfection but without it the battle is lost before it is even joined.

Contemporary terrorism has specific political targets as it itself admits – Palestine, Iraq or corrupt and repressive Arab regimes. It is not concerned about the West except insofar as the West impinges on its own chosen arena. If that is the case, then it is evident that Western policy must recognise its own shortcomings and correct them. After all, if the offence is removed then the popular groundswell of anger about Western partiality and double-standards will subside and terrorism will lose its popular support. That, however, is the counsel of perfection that all our politicians are too cowardly or too arrogant to endorse!