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Beyond Extremism and Ideology: The Unanticipated Constructive Roles played by North African Islamists and Jihadis in Contemporary British Society

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Abstract: *A great deal of current British political debate hinges on discussions about the role of “extremism” in the alienation of British Muslims and the subsequent emergence of terrorist threats. Interviews with British North Africans who are Islamists and former jihadis into violent radicalization showed that there are clear distinctions between “terrorists” and Islamists. Islamists and/or former jihadis who held the belief that Islam provided a clear moral basis to confront injustice, including terrorism, had an appreciation of the ability to engage in meaningful political debate in Britain and wished to engage in the betterment of British society. Such approaches were partially a reaction to their experiences of brutal state repression while participating in Islamist movements in North Africa. The current thinking does not account for the diversity of those labelled as “extremist” and incorrectly assesses their threats to community cohesion and/or security, hindering the potential for improved civic dialogues.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years I have acted as Principle Investigator on a project that conducted over fifty interviews with individuals of North African origin who have either been actively engaged in Islamic political movements in Tunisia and Algeria and/or participated in violent jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. These interviews aimed to unearth some of the basic causal factors and processes which lay behind violent radicalization and participation in terrorist activities in Britain and beyond. The subject of the interviews was quite wide ranging – though there were several key areas that they focused on: “radicalization”, the politics of Islamism in Britain, previous experiences of Islamically-inspired political activism, and engagement with the British State, particularly with the police. We sought to interview those who either knew or participated in violent radical activities in Britain such as the “jihadi circles” that sprung up around Abu Hamza at the Finsbury Park Mosque in the early 2000s, or those who followed Abu Qatada, who issued *fatwahs* (Islamic religious positions) that directly supported and/or directed terrorist and/or insurgent violence in North Africa and beyond.

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While conducting research into “violent radicalization”, a separate but related research question emerged – what is the relationship between extremism and terrorism? What underpins the assumptions that an adherence to a specific ideology is causally associated with violence? This related research question emerged as a project which led us to question the initial premise of our work. We discovered that much of the policy driven “conventional wisdom” approaches to radicalization were premised on assumptions of the causal roles of ideology, alienation, and disaffection failed to be reflected in the data that we were collecting (Githens-Mazer 2010; Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010). We also found ourselves in the midst (and occasionally participating) in a heated political debate between those who proclaimed that Islamically-inspired political activism (from here on Islamism for shorthand) was a fundamental problem for (British) liberal democracy and directly causally related to participation in terrorism, and those who believed that Islamism had little to do with wider questions of terrorism or political violence in the British context.

To empirically observe radicalization and document what had happened, we interviewed those that had been in and around the British “jihadi” or Londonistan scene. As we conducted our interviews, many of the interviewees were publicly accused by various think-tanks and politicians of holding extremist views and even of being security threats because of alleged acts as “foreign mujahedeen” in Afghanistan. We knew that these individuals were not terrorists², and yet, ethically and conceptually, we were forced to ask ourselves: what was separating the individuals whom we were interviewing from those who were actively engaging in and encouraging violence in the name of Islam in Britain? This question became even more salient because the subjects of our interviews were all involved in forms of peaceful and democratic political activities, and many were actively participating in efforts to confront al-Qaeda inspired attempts to promote violence against Britain and the West.

This paper will suggest that there were two key bases for distinguishing these Islamists and returning jihadis who wanted to constructively (and peacefully) participate in British political debates and engagements from those who were participating or encouraging terrorist violence. Resilience to violence and engagement in British civil society seemed to be based on:

- a general sense that Islamic faith, practice and belief dictates that political engagement should be peaceful, constructive and active, in order to try to make Britain a better state and environment in which to live.

² There is an inherent selection bias in the interview data presented here. This selection bias is due to the fact that the interviewees were engaged in peaceful political engagement and committed to participation in British civil society and would be unlikely to apprise us as interviewers of any illegal or clandestine activities. However, these interviews were more intimate than passing conversations: they were conducted here as part of a long-term research engagement. Interviews lasted over two hours each and multiple interviews were conducted over a period of time, in some cases over four years, in a series of “conversations”. Considering that one researcher on this project is a former member of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch, we are also confident in the congruence of what these interviewees were saying and what they were doing. At the end of the inductive discussion of these interviews, we attempted to triangulate these themes against action in reference to the “takeover” of the Finsbury Park Mosque from Abu Hamza al-Masri in 2005.

- the clear realization that Britain provides a political environment which is safe and just, and that this is something not only worthy of praise and respect, but worth protecting at all costs.

MORE ISLAM IS BETTER

Our research showed that that a deeper knowledge of, faith in and practice of Islam creates a basis for constructive political engagement. There is a sense that Islamic faith, by establishing a moral context for everyday political practice, has a direct bearing on senses of justice in both the worldly and spiritual realms. One individual pointed out that they felt that Islam was a faith based not on love, but on a clear set of laws that separated right from wrong that cannot be manipulated to suit a political agenda.

For one interviewee, faith in Islam informed his political engagement with British society and his desire to stand up to Abu Hamza, the Finsbury Park Mosque based preacher who was later convicted of hate crime and terrorist offences. For him, Islam gave him a clear sense of right and wrong – a sense of right and wrong that created a basis for partnering up with the police. Islam thus helped to define the basis for a constructive relationship with the police and security services, as exemplified by the counter-terrorism partnership work with the Muslim Contact Unit in London's Metropolitan Police (Lambert 2010). Islam also provided a framework by which to approach and oppose organizations such as the British National Party.

I think if we teach the religion it will bring people the right way and the police as well... you can do a lot. You can do a lot for both way, because it's not only bring radical Muslims you are dealing with; radical Muslim and British National Party from another side waiting, and if those people became jihadi, make more British National Party another side and start everyone losing, everyone losing, not only this community or that community, everyone would lose with very hard messages coming from everywhere.

While for this man the combination of life in Britain and his own Islamic faith, belief and practice created a way to re-imagine personal identity and make sense of his past experiences in new ways, for another interviewee the combination led to confusion.

When I first arrive at Heathrow Airport in 1985 and saw a police officer wearing a turban I was baffled and pleasantly surprised - I didn't know he was a Sikh. In Egypt police never wore beards because any sign of religious adherence was actively discouraged. It was widely understood that to get on in the police and government you had to drink alcohol and generally avoid the impression of being a practicing Muslim. My first positive impressions of London police were confirmed when I got to know the police in Finsbury Park. Most times they were always genuinely courteous.

Yet another individual saw our research as an opportunity to be part of project that embraced faith and gave something back to wider British society:

at the moment we're sort of trying to construct a British Muslim identity so projects like Islamic ... you know are trying to showcase Muslim contributions to British life. So in a sense we're doing something very different because we're looking at how Muslims are a force for good within Britain but at the same time we're not completely denying our past which is that perhaps we might have had conflicts with Britain in the past which were political, but now we see ourselves as very much a part of society and trying to utilize that potential within a very different setting.

This comment highlights the sense of personal and communal progress and development in their "new" lives in Britain, emphasizing that the interviewees perceive that they have a tangible stake in British society. Having a stake in British society meant attaching personal or community development to the project of the state as a whole. In almost all cases this was described with local examples, as eloquently summarized by one individual:

... from the people who we do speak to you can see that there is concern about their kids, what they're getting involved in, where, they want them, you look around here, who are the people who are dominating Brixton market, it's the Algerians, they have got in there, they have got businesses going, the whole of Brixton now, it used to be black is now pretty much Algerian centric, they want to create a stake here economically... they see their future here because they are investing, they are building up, well that means again that they want their children to become part of it, to progress.

However, this stake comes with rights and responsibilities, as well as the same threats as everyone else within British society. As one interviewee put it:

When after the 7/7 bombing, Nick Fielding contacted me, a senior reporter of the *Sunday Times*, for an interview and I mentioned this to him, he said targeting Britain, what does that mean for you? I told him that the question is not correct, not targeting Britain – ask me, what is your reaction to people targeting *you*? ...We [Muslim communities] are using that underground. Every day I am using it, my wife is using it and my children are using going and coming back from school so it doesn't mean it is targeting British... The right question is about, why do they target us? After all Muslims were some of the victims of [July 7 attacks] and I could have been one of them, so this is makes us all targets. No one gives me money to say that but my heart is talking.

BRITAIN AS SAFE SPACE

Almost every interviewee expressed a profound sense of gratitude for their sanctuary in Britain and recognized the privilege and responsibility that accompanies asylum status. Beyond a sense of debt and gratitude, these individuals also had invested their futures

in Britain, with new and various businesses enterprises. Indeed, all of the interviewees expressed that life in Britain was not a temporary stopover, or a place to bide their time until they returned home. In part this reflects the political reality for most, if not all of them, since a return to Algeria, Tunisia and even Morocco could mean instant imprisonment, severe torture, or even death. The lack of democratic accountability and the need to confront injustice in their nations of origin led them to participate in movements such as the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) in Tunisia, Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, and *an-Nahda*, or Renaissance Party in Tunisia. Participation in these movements led to first-hand experiences of unjust treatment including stints in jail where they were sometimes severely tortured. As a result, they appreciated and wanted to contribute to British society and wanted their children to contribute to, and benefit from a just British society in the long-term.

Previous repressive experiences abroad meant that our interviewees regularly made comparisons between experiences in North Africa, and their experiences in Britain – a day-to-day, minute-by-minute comparison of what had happened before, and what was happening now. They found themselves, on the one hand, in new diaspora networks of political activism – not only among former friends and colleagues from North Africa who had also found their way to “sanctuary” in Britain, but also new acquaintances, sometimes met abroad and rediscovered in Britain, or with similar previous experiences and politically coalescing in their new shared home. Our interviewees regularly acknowledged that they were betwixt and between near and far politics – discussing issues affecting British Muslim communities at one moment, recent developments in North Africa the next, and regularly contextualizing them within wider global trends about the impact of U.S. foreign policy on Islamic political activism in the Middle East and North Africa. On a practical level, this meant that various organizations such as the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), British Muslim Initiative (BMI), and the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) were seen not only as institutional means of participation in British politics, but also as mechanisms for making sense of past experiences and trying to learn from them and engender change for Muslims both in Britain and in North Africa. For the interviewees territorial geographic boundaries were perceived as less concrete in terms of time and experience. Rather than differentiating between current and past forms of activism, they were more likely to think of these experiences and responses contextually – given the relative presence or absence of brutal political repression.

The interviewees constantly thought about how their experiences of British political “fairness” could be translated into North African contexts. The absence of repression, and commitment to the rule of law and fair treatment of individuals by the British state are traits that were greatly admired by our interviewees. They regretted post 9/11 derogations from the rule of law in the name of the “war on terror”, agreeing with positions taken by human rights campaign groups and organizations such as Liberty and wanted the UK to remain an international role model. One interviewee stated that he felt that exilic experiences of political freedom and participation in Britain would even be enough to bring about meaningful political change in North Africa in the future.

I've learned a lot from being in Britain. We used to see the west here as the other, now we are part of it and it's part of us and don't forget

that I believe that these movement(s) will rule the Islamic world in the next twenty, thirty years, it will rule it. If you have part of it, part of its leadership, part of its leadership who lived in the west, we know the west, and some of them who like the west the children are wisdom and now are British and they don't have Tunisian citizenship. We cannot go to the embassy and this is I think in the long term is very, very fruitful for us and in the interest of both parties.

Interviewees were constantly trying to make sense of past activities, Islam, and the British experience, and in almost every case there was demonstrable evidence of how the British experience was directly affecting their perceptions of what political engagement was, should, and could be in the future. One individual particularly highlighted a generational divide – especially between those former activists and jihadis who felt a commitment to stay involved in the politics of their nations of origin, and those who saw these experiences as informing British political participation.

I feel obviously a close affinity to Tunisia but I don't see that as my core sort of concern being a Muslim in Britain. I feel that we have to use the political experience that was gained in those countries and apply it to our situation in Britain. You know, so I think there isn't, in that sense there's a kind of divide between the two because older generations looking back at their home experiences or, you know, experiences from their countries of origin whereas the ... generation is looking at using that experience and looking how it can fit into Britain here. So for example, you know, I'm working on the election for the Mayor of London.

The specific role of Britain, as opposed to Europe or the "West" in general, often emerges in the narratives told in these interviews. Our interviewees constantly stated that they are thankful to Britain, and that they prize British political values above others. Many compared the experiences of Muslims living in Britain with those living in France which has a three million plus resident North African population. The interviewees saw the situation of the North Africans in France as a direct reflection of the French colonial past in North Africa (Githens-Mazer 2008b; Githens-Mazer 2008a; Githens-Mazer 2009). In a statement that seems to challenge Kepel's description of Londonistan, one interviewee stated,

You know the French arrogance and ignorance is blaming Britain, but violence in France is far more than violence in Britain because I told you [there was] one act of violence in Britain in 7/7. Every night in this French suburbs [sic] there is violence and they don't want to talk about it unless they're firing all the country they'll show it on television but there is confrontation between the police and the young people every night in France and this if you go to the suburbs in Paris and go see them on the street then this could be translated into violence in the medium term

For some interviewees the historical differences in the relationships between Muslims and the states of Britain and France impacted today's moral justifications of violence –

or at least presented a different context for understanding Muslim community strife against the state. Interviewees sometimes referred to this as a “covenant” between themselves and their new homes, describing a reciprocity between Muslims living in non-Muslim states and the freedom of religion and political expression in these states. According to this notion of ‘covenant’, which is more accurately described as the “abode of oath”, “asylum”, or *dar ul a’had* in theological terms, where Muslims have the right to practice their religion unfettered by the state, there is, in return, a clear obligation to follow the laws and practices of this state. They considered such a covenant to be in place in Britain, making 7/7 (as well as 9/11 in the USA) a violation of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). For these individuals, the 7/7 attacks were therefore immoral and irrational because it violated the obligations of Muslims living in Britain to the British state. They distinguished their situation in the UK and the situation of Muslims in the US as clearly different from their past experiences in North Africa, where there were historical, political and theological justifications for direct action.

There is a big difference between [violence in North Africa] and 7/7 in Britain or 9/11 in America. It is a big difference because those people [colonizers and later repressive governments] occupied my country, and this is a big difference. I want to get my country back to what it should be, but here it is not your country, they invite you to live here, so you have obligations. If I hadn’t come here I would have suffered there. Now, maybe I couldn’t even find papers or something for my own country. They’ve taken them from me, so why would I ever even need to bomb them?

Despite recognition of the privileges and obligations that come from living in Britain, Muslim communities and individuals have a growing sense that commentators are targeting all Muslims and painting them as fifth columnists or as inherently problematic to British society. This point of view is often highly nuanced and demonstrates a high degree of political awareness, as characterized by great knowledge of and sensitivity to media reports and the wider blogosphere. On several occasions we picked up on a sense of frustration that while the state provided justice and political engagement based broadly on the rule of law, there was a concern that politicians were manipulating fears and anxieties through counter-terrorism policies.

I think what we’ve always found frustrating is that by all means say that you don’t agree with what the Muslim Brotherhood are aiming for but don’t deny the opportunity to talk about and to have some kind of constructive debate about it, because then you are including them in your society and in your process.

Opinions were split on the Quilliam Foundation and Policy Exchange (hereafter Quilliam)³ – an organization supported by the UK government and touted as the world’s first think-tank that aims to counter Islamist political agendas in Britain. British Muslims had the general perception that Quilliam aimed to pressure British Muslims to “de-politicize” their faith and was part of an attempt to defenestrate all Islamically-inspired political activism from Britain. Many of our interviewees doubted Quilliam’s

³ Quilliam Foundation and Policy Exchange. <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/>

ability to deliver on what they promised, i.e. to end terrorism by interrupting an alleged conveyor belt from extremist Islamist ideology to violent action, but none criticized their fundamental right to prevent terrorism. As the quote below indicates, for one interviewee Quilliam was ineffective.

From what I've seen, Quilliam hasn't reached young people at the grassroots at all and they're not really interested in its message because I think they feel that it's not really addressing the things that they're concerned about. You know, they're not reaching young people in East London for example or South London at all and I think they're not really interested in reaching those people. You know, and I think the Quilliam Foundation's project is much more focused at sort of trying to sort of convert the elite and create an intellectual elite that will hopefully filter down to the grassroots.

British Muslims had the perception that Quilliam was a legitimate voice in an open political debate, but that it overly dominated the conversation and was stifling meaningful political engagement within Muslim communities and between these communities and the British state. For many Quilliam was not illegitimate, but it was being instrumentally used in a specific political agenda to divide British Muslim between faith-based activists and those engaged in the wider political context. For our interviewees, Quilliam's agenda reflected the prevailing political winds in the UK, especially during the prospect of a change from a Labour to Tory governments in the lead up to the May 2010 General Elections. For some interviewees, the intervention of organizations like Quilliam, and forerunners such as the Sufi Muslim Council of Britain, was viewed as counterproductive.

This thing that the government is entering they don't know what they are doing and they are going to harm the natural and the organic evolution of British Islam within Britain. It's better to take off the bad things, to focus on bad things to be in, rather than engineer Islam . . . It could backfire and it would be harmful in the longer run because the main thing is to put what you are against. You are against terrorism of any kind.

Even if the interviewees felt these strategies were counterproductive, Quilliam and similar organizations challenged them to prove that they have a clear, democratic and constructive role to play in British politics and society, inspiring them to create more coherent and able political organizations that prioritize institutional engagement. Perceptions of a wider anti-Islamist campaign also provided inspiration for further political organization and contributed to the political resilience of these former activists and jihadis. Some interviewees perceived the label of "Islamist" as accusatory and as part of an attempt to frame politically active British Muslims as inherently disloyal to Britain. One interviewee, commenting on a poll published in a leading newspaper, stated:

If you ask me I'm a Muslim, if you put in a way that is, "Is your loyalty to Allah, or your loyalty to Britain?" 99.9% tell you my loyalty is to Allah. And tomorrow you will find *The Sun* saying, "99% of Muslims

they don't have, Britain is not their first loyalty" which is true but misleading. So when they put the will of Allah and the will of the people, that's how we started having influence and with people, with all connections come here and go there.

The interviewees expressed their anxiety and frustration over the constant stigmatization of Islamic political thought and activism in the UK. They felt that political engagement with their Islamic faith was persistently depicted as an inherent danger to Western liberal democracy while they wished to enact positive, constructive changes in North Africa, replacing an atmosphere of repression and torture with increased political openness and democracy. They reported that their political thought had undergone permanent changes as a result of their experiences and engagement in Britain. When their ideological shifts were described as "tactical" rather than "real" shifts in political thinking by powerful political organizations like Quilliam, they felt that their transnational political evolution was not being taken seriously. In almost all cases, the interviewees felt as though they wanted to and were indeed playing constructive roles in British society and sought to help reproduce this engagement in North Africa and other contexts. However, their political thought and activist roles were stigmatized and dismissed when the transformative impact of their experiences of living in Britain on their political views went unacknowledged.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study we found that these British Muslims had an appreciation of Britain as a sanctuary from unjust repression and felt an Islamically-inspired obligation to confront injustice and contribute to making Britain a better place for the next generation. This finding suggests that the experiences of Islamically-inspired political activists, and those who had past jihadi activities, can form the basis of constructive approaches to confronting terrorist organizations and recruitment. Furthermore, holding an "Islamist style" ideological perspective does not translate into a serious threat to security and community cohesion, as proclaimed by some organizations, including the Quilliam Foundation, and can actually provide a political and moral framework for political engagement.

The point of this paper is not to defend the particular political positions of these interviewees, or to defend Islamically-inspired political activism in the British context. Debates on the role of faith-based politics in a modern secular state, and on the relationship of identity, faith and social cohesion in the modern world abound. The interviewees are able to participate in these debates and it is not our place, or the place of this study, to defend any political position – such a move would be disingenuous and/or patronizing, potentially suggesting that they are not capable of this themselves. However, research on the attitudes of some Islamists, even former jihadis in Britain, seems to be more positive and constructive than what has been assumed by anti-Islamist commentators.

The conflation of "Islamism" or Islamically-inspired political activism with "extremism" or terrorism is inaccurate and potentially counter-productive. Individuals labelled "Islamist" or "extremist" are generally accorded little space in open political

debates because their political positions are naïvely conflated with terrorist threats. This assumption has obfuscated the fact that some “Islamists” wish to engage constructively, meaningfully and non-violently in British politics, and so the potential benefit of their participation in British civil society has gone unrecognized and unheralded. Thus, the British Government and society are missing a key opportunity mobilize and partner with communities that are best placed not only to confront terrorism at home, but also to promote significant democratic and constructive political dialogues in regions such as North Africa.

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