

Dr Robert Crowcroft

The facts of the latest terrorist plot against the West are still hazy, but what we do know is this: simultaneous attacks have been planned against several European cities, including London and probably sites in France and Germany. These attacks were to be modelled on the effective 'commando raids' in Mumbai in 2008, in which groups of terrorists wreaked havoc with automatic weapons and killed hundreds of people. India has still not recovered. And the plot was led by senior Al-Qaeda figures in Waziristan. The intelligence services think that the plot was in the 'final stages' before being launched, that it would have been a 'spectacular', that British Muslims were once again involved, and that the purpose was an old-fashioned suicidal rampage. The plot seems to have been disrupted by American drone strikes in Pakistan, killing the brains of the plot.

There are two points here. One is the absolute centrality of the United States to any sensible security strategy for Britain. I will try not to even get into what this latest American intervention to protect our citizens says about the perspectives of those like Labour leader Ed Miliband (who wants a more 'independent' foreign policy) and his ally Sadiq Khan (who thinks the US alliance is 'poison' for Britain). All I will say is that I look forward to the day when the likes of Miliband and Khan sign up to defend the country with their lives if the Americans decided a whining ally isn't worth having. As a university teacher, when confronted by anti-American students I routinely stop seminars and pose the question whether they, personally, would be willing to kill in order to defend the realm. The bewildered look on their faces when I do so tells me that they have never contemplated an activity that throughout human history has been the norm for most males. But the fact that people in this country can lead such a sheltered existence is due only to Britain's alliance with the United States and our possession of nuclear weapons. Surely it isn't beyond us as a society not to mess it all up.

The second point is that given the inability of Islamic terrorists to match, or better, the 9/11 atrocities over the past nine years, from their perspective this kind of attack would appear to be the most sensible kind of approach to take. All they need is a few guns and a rampage can be launched. With Mumbai-esque operations there is less of a need to do the kind of things that increase the risk of detection — like buying chemicals and cooking explosives in suburban kitchens. The blunt (and frightening) truth is that if I was an Islamic terrorist, settling on a 'commando raid' rampage would now look a far more profitable means of spreading fear and chaos than attempting to stage so-called 'grand' terror attacks.

Will home-grown terrorists head in this direction? If they do, the prospects for social peace in this country will be poor. It is significant that this plot emanated from Pakistan — where Islamic extremists are at least familiar with the concept of 'strategy'. We should be grateful that, so far, domestic extremists have proven even more inept at waging an insurgency against Britain than was the IRA — and they were shockingly bad, to say the least. Instead those British citizens who turn to terrorism have been more inclined to gesture and feel-good exhibitionism about killing the infidels than with actually getting on and killing them. The 7/7 bombings were the only significant Islamist attack on these shores since 9/11, due to not only the diligence of law-enforcement agencies but also the incompetence of domestic terrorists. If more British Muslims come under the operational sway of those people abroad who actually understand how to run an insurgency, then terror attacks could become a more frequent occurrence.

Take the 2005 attack on the Tube and Tavistock Square. Brutal? Yes. Strategically effective? Absolutely not. The purpose of an insurgency is to win the support of a particular part of the population (in this case, the wider British Muslim community). To do that, they need to be radicalised (here, made not only sympathetic to, but willing to actively assist, the Islamist causes). And to be radicalised, the majority of the population must be persuaded to take

repressive measures against them (in other words, turn the non-Muslims against the Muslim minority). From this perspective, 7/7 was a dismal failure. The plotters were glorified exhibitionists. Contrast it with the Chechens who conducted the horrendous Beslan school siege in 2005. Now they had an eye for strategy. And compare it with the Mumbai atrocities as well. The reaction of the British public to rampaging, random attacks against the vulnerable or major national hubs doesn't bear thinking about. At the very least, racial tensions in this country would increase markedly.

The terrorists, therefore, have important decisions to make. If they become more cunning and with a greater eye for strategy, then our stable society will find itself in danger. And so we have important decisions to make too: about whether we will stop rubbing salt in the wound of the relationship with the United States, and what we are going to do to prepare for attacks like Beslan or Mumbai. Because it is almost certain that, sooner or later, they will happen.

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