



Federation Star

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Is free speech ever too costly?

By Kenneth W. Stein

Does it matter if there is a direct link between the July 7 bombings in the London transport system and the July 21 failed attacks? Of course it matters if a set of cells with financial sources and logistical training are being guided by some foreign source or individual. And if Interpol or police forces across the world can arrest culprits and planners associated with the bombing, there is a comfort in knowing that this war on terrorism or struggle against extremism has won a victory or staved off the next attack.

It matters because those of us who live in liberal societies, where individual freedoms are so cherished, feel that the bad guys were caught, incarcerated, and will pay for their ill deeds.

However, it is a wrong assumption to believe that because there were no casualties in the second London transport attack, that the attack failed. If the attacks are not measured solely in numbers of death or injured, but graded in terms of emotional responses, they were an unqualified success. Together with the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., the Madrid train bombings and other terrorist attacks against innocent civilians, each has generated individual, national, and international anxieties. These attacks have cut into the very fiber of societies that cherish freedom of movement, liberty of action, and unrestrained pursuit of happiness.

Terrorists have not merely detonated bombs, they have poisoned our lives: they have inserted in our minds recurring apprehension. When and where is the next attack? Can they be prevented? What must be done to confront the poison that makes us wary of going to a public place, of taking our children to the shopping mall, going to a movie theater, or driving to work or to school?

To answer what must be done, we wrack our brains trying to find causation for the attacks. Our logic takes over. If we can identify and write about why they did it and why there is a need to kill innocent people, we feel we are tackling the problem, and maybe even moving to solve it. One thing for certain, the London attacks proved that trying to change regimes, create reform, and generate democracies in North Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia will not insulate societies from home-grown terrorists who feel uprooted and disenfranchised in Western cultures. While the Bush foreign policy to install democracy abroad is bold and innovative, it is not a foolproof solution for stopping or slowing the hatred and anger cultivated and delivered in the modern technological and globalized world.

What is our checklist of why do they do this? Was it the Blair/Bush foreign policy in the Middle East that spawned rage that gives one person the right to kill innocent people? Disaffected

children of south Asian middle class immigrants in their teens and twenties may have been angrily opposed to the coalition attack on Saddam Hussein, but that is not a sufficient explanation for putting explosives in a backpack under a seat in the London underground. Is it diverted anger from Arab and Moslem leaders making promises to destroy the state of Israel and failing so consistently? Is it diverted anger against their parents who seem to have been too docile in transiting from third world homes to new shores?

Even if an independent Palestinian state had been established in 1947, 1967, 1979, 1991, or 2000, it would not have changed Arab political culture with its autocratic regimes, military establishments, domineering internal security services, and mistrustful inter-Arab relations. And please do not tell me that the Palestinians themselves or the Arab leaders are not responsible for failing to establish a Palestinian state when they had the chance over the last half decade.

Are we seeing today frustration vented in free societies in Europe, the U.S. and elsewhere by disaffected youth because Arab states had such incredible sums of oil wealth in the 1970s and 1980s and little was done to share that wealth between the very rich and the very poor? Is the frustration of young Moslems who want to flee the Middle East to Europe due to the insignificant chance of finding employment with a gainful income in the over-populated states of the Middle East? Is it frustration

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born from living under the thumb of Middle Eastern and South Asian leaders who have denied civil liberties to their inhabitants? Is it the inability or unwillingness of recent immigrants to Europe to assimilate into their new societies because their new hosts are less than hospitable, or is it the immigrant society that does not seek to be integrated into new surroundings?

Indeed, there is an abundance of personal frustration. When you mix it with a growing ability to receive justification for one's actions through private Jihad, the blend is incendiary. In the 21st century, one can struggle against a bigger enemy and be motivated without having an ideological guru or without going to a lecture or to a mosque to hear a motivational speech to engage in action. In the world of videos, CDs, DVDs, recorded tapes, fax machines, and the Internet, one only needs electricity and a little bit of money to access the message that stimulates precooked feelings of displacement and suppressed anger.

The attacks on September 11, 2001, were aimed against icons of American institutionalized strength. The attacks in London and Madrid were focused on where people congregate. When the attacks come against power plants, harbors, airports, water purification facilities, parliaments, and media outlets, we know that the attacks are no longer personally motivated but are aimed at destroying civilizations based on individual freedoms.

The casualties of privatized Jihad are numerous. Individuals die, are injured, or are traumatized. Gradually, fear develops. You are in a tunnel entrance, movie line, dining out, at the grocery store, at the Rome Termini, or in the Tokyo subway and

you look warily at your neighbor. Fear can lead to irrational thinking. Summary punishment of perceived bad guys ensues. Tensions between states can evolve. Liberty, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness suffer.

Balancing national security with civil liberties becomes our ultimate test. The compact between government and the governed changes. Tolerance and liberal attitudes lose. The worst that could happen is that we do nothing. Even worse would be for us to say that only our policy, our lifestyle, and our actions are responsible for heinous acts of terrorism.

Giving refuge to the tired, the poor, and the weary must continue, but not at the expense of permissiveness, not at the expense of being able to go to work free from the threats of violence and force. We can not generalize about Moslems or Arabs or Pakistanis or any person or nationality, regardless of color, race, and creed. However, if you say overthrow the government or advocate killing of innocents, it is time to give life sentences; there should be no hesitation to expel those who advocate sedition. Disagreement with government should be encouraged, but not its overthrow, whether worded directly or indirectly through metaphor, allegory, or euphemism.

What we can not control is the anger and viciousness spewed across the Internet. That genie is out of the bottle. So we must act where we can. A free press is essential and must be protected at all costs, but extolling the virtues of a privatized Jihad in media outlets must be banned, just as we ban meat with mad cow disease. Both, as we know now, can be and are killers.

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