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SUICIDE BOMBINGS: THE ULTIMATE WEAPONS OF (BRITISH) RADICAL FUNDAMENTALISM

Abstract: *According to a widespread belief, what makes information good or bad, accurate or inaccurate is closely linked to the needs of the society in which information is produced. A constant need of contemporary society is to confront an ever-increasing reality, i.e. man's increasing appetite for violence as the most efficient means of socialising with the others. All domains of human existence, the social-political one included, have fallen prey to this attitude. An extreme form of political violence, terrorism (suicide terrorism in particular as an ever-widening phenomenon) provides our main point of interest here. The paper as a whole makes a direct address to this widely debated topic by stressing the idea of suicide terrorism as the reckless sacrifice of one's life in the process of destroying or attempting to destroy a political target. The 7th of July attacks on London assumed the "symbolic" significance of the first terrorist attacks of religious orientation on European soil and they constitute the particular case I have chosen to illustrate the fact that present-day technologically-advanced societies are most vulnerable and quite unprepared to deal with such extremist gestures, superimposed on radical fundamentalist beliefs.*

Key-words*: terrorism, suicide bombings, radical fundamentalism, myth*

The Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade once stated that myth had vanished from modern cultures, taking with it the sacredness of human existence and bringing instead a more cruel awareness of man's profane condition[1]. The events that followed Eliade's activity hosted events that can be interpreted as a living proof of society's need to fill the blank with the production of new myths (without the aura, the uniqueness and authenticity that was characteristic of the ancient ones) that would aim at substituting the old ones (successfully or not, that we shall see). Modern man is surrounded by myth, but the difficulty of distinguishing it easily is not related to the hidden character of the sacred, but rather to its common, ordinary nature (in Eliade's terms, lay or profane). Following this line of judgement, we should invoke as a standing proof of this new reality the theory of Roland Barthes who stated that our daily existence grows on such myths as the automobile, advertisement, strip tease or tourism.[2] Beyond these new forms of myth that sustain the legitimacy of our lives, there are others that reproduce a threat to our existence. Our main concern in this direction is *the myth of terrorism*, whereby *myth* embodies *the set of beliefs and thoughts that articulate the Westerners' attitude towards this particular manifestation of political violence*. As a sign of its former sacredness, as well as a mark of its imperfect nature, it still preserves some of the features of ancient myths: it remains a narrative of an event of a significant importance; it is transmitted from individual to individual, from country to country and period to period, but not by word of mouth, since the technological advancement would not allow it. At the same time, it includes new elements as, for instance, the nature of the characters- no longer Gods or famous heroes with emplary deeds, but rather human beings conventionally supposed to take pleasure in killing and destroying human lives and goods. The general idea that structures the substance of these modern myths-the myth of terrorism included- is the necessity to demonstrate to the large public that people- not the Divinity or blind destiny-have the power to make species-especially the

[1] Cf. Eliade, Mircea, *Sacrul şi Profanul*, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1995.
[2] Cf. Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, Noonday Press, New York, 1972.

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human species- disappear or grow weaker etc. [1]

In recent years the myth of terrorism has become an increasingly central theme, not only in the speeches of political parties, but also in the media and the public opinion in general. Yet little seems to be known with great precision (and not merely intuitively) about the term itself and the reality it refers to. The so-called "popularity" of the term resulted in a number of difficulties in finding a place for terrorism in a theoretical framework conceived in terms of definition, typology, forms and consequences. We can agree that terrorism is a problem, but we cannot agree on what terrorism is. For the sake of our endeavour, we shall introduce in this paper a definition that will certainly serve as a theoretical framework: *Terrorism is the intentional use of, or threat to use violence against the civilian population or against civilian targets, in order to attain political or social aims, to intimidate opponents, or to publicise causes.*

This is the basic idea we commonly extract from the literature on terrorism: terrorism constitutes the use of violence or the threat to use violence (against civilians) as the primary means of attaining a political objective.

Terrorism as a way of challenging the viability of contemporary institutions and exploiting the vulnerabilities of the individual and of the community as a whole is definitely not a recent phenomenon. Bloodletting has always been present in the history of mankind, but the emergence of this new type of systematic violence has gained symbolic dimensions and has achieved ever-increasing dimensions. The spectacular [2] side of the performance is guaranteed by the usage of (un)conventional methods of action, i.e. bombing, hijacking, hostage taking and, rather recently, *martyrdom*(the perpetrators' will to sacrifice their own lives as the most efficient way of sending a message.) Our main point of interest here would be the first terrorist attack of religious orientation that happened on European soil.

A short rendering of the concrete events will prove most useful at this point. On Thursday, 7 July 2005 a series of four bomb attacks struck London's public transport network towards the end of the morning rush hour: at 8:50 a.m., three bombs exploded within 50 seconds of each other on three London underground trains. A fourth bomb exploded on a double-decker at 9:47 a.m. The bombings were the direct cause of a daylong disruption of the city's transportation system and generated great shock among the population. The consequences were terrible: fifty-six commuters were killed, including the four suspected bombers, and 700 other injured. Generally, the event assumed the significance of a modest, yet effective enough reincarnation of September 11 in a European setting.

The "architect" behind the events was identified as the same terrorist organisation that had previously attacked The United States. Al-Qaeda did not lay direct claim of the terrorist assault, still the experts identified the method and the terrorists' technique as leading to Al-Qaeda modus operandi; and on the other hand, the 2nd in rank inside Al-Qaeda expressed his support of the acts happened in London on videotape broadcast by Al-Jazeera.

The attack on Britain caught nobody by surprise. It was expectable that Britain should become a possible target for terrorist attacks due to the involvement of the British nation in fighting terrorist deeds. After the involvement in the war against Iraq, "*every*

[1] Segré, Monique ed., *Mituri, Rituri, Simboluri în Societatea Contemporană*, Amacord, Timişoara, 2000, p.34.
[2] cf Hoffman, Bruce, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, 1999.

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senior British policeman, intelligence chief or home secretary you cared to ask about the probability of a terrorist attack gave a similar answer: 100%."[1]

Explanations of the events were many: "*That was so both because of its status as an international financial centre, an epitome of the West and its capitalist ways, and because Britain has long been a close ally of the United States, enemy number one for Al-Qaeda and its terrorist associates.*"[2] Once again the victim of the terrorist attack assumed greater meanings that ensured in a way the common belief that terrorist acts are directed against symbolic targets. This time however it was the most powerful country of Europe which was powerless under such disastrous attack.

As it happened with 911 attacks, London bombers used old techniques (that had already proved successful, and were therefore secure[3]), to which they added new spectacular traits. The novelty of the entire operation is not doubtable: not one single bomb, but four exploded at approximately the same time. Experts refer to this situation as coordinated attacks and approach it as a rather rare technique (the causes of this paucity cannot be rendered with great precision, but perhaps the huge financial costs might have had something to do with it). It is said that the London attacks cost the terrorist organisation approximately 300 million pounds, this is why they say that only solid terrorist organisations have the possibility of planning such operations. The simultaneity of the attacks helps us identify two purposes:

- First, to show that the respective organisation has the financial, logistic and human capital to perform such an operation;
- Secondly, to attract more attention from the intended audience.

Technically, coordinated terrorist attacks ensure a larger number of people killed in the same temporal interval and therefore their impact is stronger. In this particular case, among the civilians killed in the operation, police investigators found four bodies that they identified as the terrorists that carried the explosives and ecuted the bombings. For some time after the event, questions continued to be asked as regards the terrorists' will to kill themselves in the attack; some minor details (the return tickets, too many identification marks carried on themselves) may have suggested a different turn of things. It has been established, however, that their deaths were no accident at all, but rather a method used by extremist fundamentalists to publicise their grievances.

The questions regarding the identity of the bombers- who were they, who generally embraces this threatening Jihad against the West- produce so many answers that their degree of utility is rather small. **Hasib Mir Hussain, Germaine Maurice Lindsay and Mohammad Sidique Khan** were essentially "*good lads*"[4], as one of their neighbours told a BBC reporter. Surprisingly enough, all four of them were British citizens of the Pakistani origin. They were normal people leading ordinary lives and seemingly integrated in the Western-type of society. Each of them had received some education (Khan was a teaching assistant and a seemingly moderate individual, as the other three seem to have been), was involved in the life of the community (local football team, for instance) and was

[1] www.bbc.co.uk
[2] www.bbc.co.uk
[3] Marret notices that terrorists are somehow reluctant to use new, unexperimented devices, due to the fact that the lack of "familiarity" with the respective methods might lead to a failure of the terrorist act.
[4] www.bbc.co.uk

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not reluctant of social contact (two of them, Khan and Lindsay, were even married). They had legal professions, and some of them were responsible for the financial situation of a family, a fact that is rather uncommon when discussing the "habits" of a terrorist; after all, the "career" requires fewer ties with any earthly affair. In a word, they gave the least motive for suspicion as being British citizens that were perfectly aware of their citizenship and their duties to the country that supported them.

The novelty of the case under study lies in the identity of the perpetrators. We are no longer dealing with Muslim subjects infiltrated on European soil, but with British citizens that adhered to the principles of Islamic radical fundamentalism and accepted to be part of various acts of Islamic terrorist violence. Two of the four had recently returned from Pakistan where they had entered into contact with a distinct type of reality and mode of thinking. The British suicide bombers adopted that faith and believed that it justified their actions. What is most important is that the events and the actors involved brought closer the threat of violence form within, thus challenging the cohesion of British (European) society. Up to that point, the British public had seen terrorism as a foreign, external threat, and definitely not something that could be connected with ordinary folk in ordinary neighbourhoods. But the revelation that the four London bombers were British citizens, middle class, educated, and with good prospects would shed a different light on the matter.

An interesting detail I found relevant for my paper is Germaine Lindsay's conversion to Islam, information that will certainly bring new elements into discussion. On numerous occasions, terrorist attacks against the West are conceived in terms of being planned by traditional Muslim communities unable to come to terms with a rapidly changing world. Does G. Lindsay belong to such a traditional community? The answer to this question would be *negative*, for he is an Islam convert that belongs to a new generation, "born again" in a new cultural, social and political environment. The culture that these four young people stand for is not genuinely British, nor Muslim; it is a hybrid, a new culture having sprung out of the interaction of Western values with Muslim mentalities. The imperfect character of this culture is perhaps the motive that stands behind the terrorist's attempt to recover and defend their traditional values.

The key issue for investigators was related to the way in which the four British terrorists that perpetrated the acts of violence against modern democracy tried to impose their own discourse intended to annihilate the democratic one. The videotaped statement of Muhammad Khan, one of the four terrorists, proves highly illustrative of this orientation. The videotape broadcast on the pan-Arab television Al-Jazeera showed Khan wearing a turban, talking directly to the camera, seemingly relad and speaking with the accent specific of the region where he had lived. The basic idea is that Khan's group had already come to terms with the alternative of death as the ultimate manner of gaining attention and they chose to let the world know of their attitude. Khan is heard saying:

"*I'm going to keep this short and to the point because it's all been said before by far more eloquent people than me. And our words have no impact upon you, therefore I'm going to talk to you in a language that you understand. Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood.*

I'm sure by now the media's painted a suitable picture of me, this predictable propaganda machine will naturally try to put a spin on things to suit the government and to scare the masses into conforming to their power and wealth-obsessed agendas.

I and thousands like me are forsaking everything for what we believe. Our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer.

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Our religion is Islam - obedience to the one true God, Allah, and following the footsteps of the final prophet and messenger Muhammad... This is how our ethical stances are dictated.

Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters.

Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight.

We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation." [1]

A second part of the tape was less clear, but he could be heard saying:

"*I myself, I myself, I make pray to Allah... to raise me amongst those whom I love like the prophets, the messengers, the martyrs and today's heroes like our beloved Sheikh Osama Bin Laden, Dr Ayman al-Zawahri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and all the other brothers and sisters that are fighting in the... of this cause.*

With this I leave you to make up your own minds and I ask you to make pray to Allah almighty to accept the work from me and my brothers and enter us into gardens of paradise."[2]

Here is the voice of a Briton converted to Islam that presents his strategy and motivations in such a way as to prevent any institution of modern democratic society to mistakenly interpret his actions. This Muslim voice stands for a far deeper reality that has been radicalised in recent times due to the emerging world conditions.

Starting from the surface level of his speech, we notice that Khan's use of meaningful language is part of his rhetorical strategy, there is nothing new about it. His discourse is an integral part of the war of ideas that usually accompanies any terror campaign and identifies violence as the only means of solving the issues.

Surprisingly enough, even this type of discourse seems to conform to the precepts of rhetoric. The engagement to brevity that opens the statement (perhaps a traditional rhetoric motive, or perhaps Khan's awareness that time was running out on him) is closely followed by the speaker's doubt as regards his ability to be eloquent (it's all been said before by far more eloquent people than me-a clear rhetorical strategy of modesty).

Khan's rhetoric is dominated by reference to global issues and contexts, and not on specific issues, such as the Iraq war. Khan does not attack the British government or individually Blair's decision to take part in the "war on terror", but his attacks are oriented against "your democratically elected governments'. Rejecting modern democratic society as a corrupting force, Khan regards himself (and thousands like him) as victims of an injustice. We may assume that the use of the plural form was not a mistake. It suggested the bomber's true motivations-his issue is not with the UK government, but with the foundation of Western power and civilization-democracy. Democracy is seen by Khan in particular (but Khan stands for a large category of people) as systems in which human will is the source of law, whereas Islamic principles are transcendental and cannot be undermined by popular will.

The distinction Khan operates between two incompatible spheres and mentalities becomes most visible. There is no room left for negotiation or reconciliation between the

[1] www.bbc.co.uk
[2] *Idem*

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Muslim and the Westerner culture and society. The dichotomy we-you that dominates Khan's speech brings about a new topos of radical fundamentalist discourse: Multicultural coexistence is inadmissible for the fear that Muslims will end up losing their faith.

Khan claims to be a devout believer who acts according to the fundamental imperatives of his religious culture that dictate and justify at the same time violence against the oppressors, i.e. the pursuit of some political purpose. The commitment to action (Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood) is not explained in terms of material gains, but rather in the desire to reach spiritual purity. Khan is an Islam believer, but Islam is a religion of peace that does not sanctify the use of violence.[1] Islam allows its believers to defend their religion, families and communities against any type of aggression, but this would be a defensive strategy rather than an offensive one.

Conventionally, terrorism is interpreted as the illegitimate use of violence against innocent non-combatants. Khan provides us with the other's view on it. He does not commit crimes against humanity, he is a soldier engaged in the holy war. Jihad is a concept with multiple meanings, "used and abused"[2] throughout Islamic history. In its more general meaning, jihad refers to the obligation of all Muslims, individual and the community, to follow and realize God's will: to lead a virtuous life and to "extend the Islamic community through preaching, education, writing etc. "(Esposito, 2002: 118). In Khan's view, Jihad means the obligation to defend Islam against different forms of aggression, "the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture" perpetrated by the Western powers against his own people.

Khan's speech helps us understand the practice of martyrdom in the context of his culture. Martyrs are usually surrounded by a whole mythology; precisely because the cultural and religious incompatibility of the two modes of thought that have been the focus of our inquiry. For most common people, of whatever religion they might be, of primary importance is the instinct for survival, the attempt to escape from death by any available means. On the other hand, the terrorist lives a so-called delusion of immortality -death is seen as a religious transition from life on earth / mortal life to eternal life. The readiness of Islam soldiers to sacrifice their life is a matter of great concern for the non-Muslim individuals. The source lies in the religious doctrine that prepares its adepts for death, for embracing death as the only alternative to this corrupt life, unlike other religions that promote the idea of living one's life in the proper manner. The suicide becomes martyrdom when done in the name of the holy war. The terrorist, however, doesn't recognize his acts as terrorism. Instead he feels he is at war with an enemy and he is using the only means available to bring about victory.

As a suicidal terrorist, Khan pretends to have a moral foundation in the words of the prophet as recorded by the Qu'ran, the sacred book of Islam according to which martyrdom is a way of preserving glory. No matter how futile the effort or impossible the goal, all that matters in his mind is the cause. Making that connection with the fundamentals of Islam, Khan encourages us to establish a further relation to the issue of fundamentalism, an issue that has gained so much currency that it deserves some serious analysis; it needs our attention especially because it is the Western representation of Islam, and not an expression that points to a way in which Muslims see themselves. The term "fundamentalism" is a Western creation to address a non-Western reality; Western society

[1] Cf. Esposito, John L., *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 118.
[2] *Idem*, p. 118.

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uses it to describe a community where religion is the primary criterion of establishing identity. The gap is obvious: two modes of conceiving the world that lead to the formation of two particular identities; on the one hand, we have the Western one that is most secular, lay, non-religious; on the other hand, we have the Muslim- highly dedicated to religious practice and to the Doctrine of the absolute.[1] The incompatibility is a source of high confusions and therefore eliminates any opportunity of understanding "the other".

The term fundamentalism is almost exclusively used in the context of religion. The disturbing part comes when fundamentalism is spoken of almost invariably with negative connotations - something highly dogmatic and something that does not belong to the secular modern world. In most cases, fundamentalism is used as descriptive term for rendering ideologically oriented religious movements, being equated with violent extremism, religious militancy, and terrorism. In reality, religious fundamentalism could be defined in terms of "a discernible pattern of religious militancy by which self-styled 'true believers' attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviours."[2]

Religious fundamentalists are generally viewed as followers of sacred scripture, taking part in what they conceive as a life and death struggle between Good and Evil and feeding on the past. In a broader sense, fundamentalism refers to a particular perspective on the world, one that encompasses both a cognitive and an emotional dimension. Its essence lies in the protest at the secularisation of society - that is, at the process by which religion and its spirit have been removed from public life.

Fundamentalism is not a monolithic idea or movement that expresses a single set of ideals. It is not to be equated with extremism or conservatism and it is far from traditionalism. Rather, fundamentalism should be seen as a kind of revolt or protest against the secular nature of the modern world. Fundamentalists typically want to see religion being ascribed a central place in public life. For those who see themselves as Muslim fundamentalists, it is a reaction to militant secularism. And for others, it represents a strong desire to see religion reflected more clearly in their community.

A common mistake occurring rather frequently is to equate Islam with fundamentalism. In fact, Islam is both a world religion (the most known religion in the West outside Christianity and Judaism, but perhaps the most misunderstood[3]) and a civilisation embracing one fifth of the population of the entire planet. Like any other religion, Islam has its fundamentalists that are dissatisfied with the marginal place where religion has been relegated in modern secular cultures.

Islamic fundamentalism in particular is often explained as "a defensive strategy against the danger posed by modernization to a religious group's traditional identity"[4]; it protects one's identity from rapid change, or modernization. Trapped between an Islamic culture that provides moral values and spiritual satisfaction and an accelerating Western culture that provides access to material, external improvement, many Muslims find an answer to fighting anxiety, alienation, and disorientation through an absolute dedication to an Islamic way of life. Accordingly, the Islamic fundamentalist is commonly depicted as

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[1] Schuon, Frithjof, *Understanding Islam*, Penguin, London, 1972, p. 16.
[2] Hudson, Rex, The Sociology And Psychology Of Terrorism: Who Becomes A Terrorist And Why?, Library of Congress, 1999, p. 4
[3] Lewis, Bernard, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, Schocken Books, New York, 1998, p. 27
[4] Hudson, Rex, op. cit., p. 47.

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"an acutely alienated individual, with dogmatic and rigid beliefs and an inferiority complex, and as idealistic and devoted to an austere lifestyle filled with struggle and sacrifice."(Hudson, p. 47)

It is important to note that very few individuals who are accurately labelled as "fundamentalists" actually participate in acts of terror and violence. It is true that they perceive the outer world through the distorting lens of their religious beliefs, but they are not obliged to act in a violent manner against the corrupt society. Most fundamentalists are struggling to live a religious life as they see it in a world that seems increasingly inimical to faith. Not being able to reach this conclusion is a source of great misunderstanding that confuses the objectivity and accuracy of the opinions expressed in relation to such events as the London attacks. Not fundamentalism, but radical fundamentalism is a danger to world stability and Western civilization.

Suicide terrorism is a problem that will remain a major security threat for years or even decades into the 21st century. It is an ancient practice used by the weak against the strong, based on the logic that if the attacker no longer even values his or her life, the attack cannot fail. London attacks are a clear representation of that mentality and they were meant to underline the idea that the power of the individual to combat a state is real and when coming from within the results are more spectacular.

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