Introducing Militant Islam: Peoples, Places and Policing

Widespread public, policing and academic interest about militant Islam can be traced to the 2001 attacks on America. Subsequent plots and acts of terrorism have ensured that interest has remained. Throughout this period, a plethora of academic articles, books, newspaper commentaries, research reports, policy documents, guidelines and manuals have been published. Yet despite, or even because of, this extensive coverage, considerable misunderstanding, if not ignorance, exists across government, police and academic institutions. Terror attacks are lazily attributed to an all encompassing 'al-Qa'ida' who are seemingly everywhere, yet frequently are nowhere. This classification results in the capabilities of the 'group' becoming grossly inflated, fuelling strategies to counter an enemy who 'can strike at any place, at any time, and with virtually any weapon' (United States Department of Homeland Security 2002: 1). And by exaggerating the nature and extent of the threat, governments have conversely helped to attract support for 'al-Qa'ida' by strengthening perceptions that it is indeed a viable option and threat to the West. It should be stressed that multiple acts of terrorism are not being overlooked, instead the argument is that there needs to be greater acknowledgement that many are not directed against Western targets or motivated by hatred of the West. A range of governments including Russian, Israeli and American, have sought to incorporate conflicts in Uzbekistan, Chechnya, the Philippines and Palestinian territories within the global 'war on terror' against enemies opposed to the West. Yet these struggles are predominantly localised with roots that precede the emergence of 'al-Qa'ida'. By categorising these conflicts within the 'a-Qa'ida' umbrella, as Burke (2006) and Valiyev (2006) point out, the underlying causes for conflicts, namely injustice, repression, mismanagement and corruption are obscured, much to the benefit of the national governments.

Oversimplification is also noticeable within attempts to understand why acts of terrorism are committed. As I sought to explain previously in *Policing[1]* and elsewhere (Vertigans 2008a, 2008b) there is a tendency to consider terrorism to be direct consequences of economic marginalisation, madness, evil and brainwashing. The reality is rather more complicated. Consequently, despite the remarkable array of published materials, levels of understanding both about different forms of militant Islam, violent and peaceful, and why people become radicalised remain weak. This creates multiple problems. For instance, eradicating violence undertaken on behalf of militant Islamic groups becomes immeasurably more difficult when security forces possess limited awareness about distinctions between groups and processes of recruitment and a concomitant lack of clarity about who and what is to be confronted. On the other side of the Janus faced counter terrorism, over reliance upon generalised profiles, if not stereotypes, extends the impact of enhanced surveillance and social constraints beyond suspected individuals to perceptions of suspected communities. In these communities, heightened police presence and feelings of disproportionate and unequal restrictions upon freedoms are connecting into extremist prophecies and contributing towards radicalisation of new militants.

This special edition therefore aims to contribute towards enhancing levels of knowledge that will improve levels of academic, policing and government understanding about forms of militant Islam, some of the groups, routes into membership, beliefs, and violent and non violent behaviour. Accordingly, articles are included that help to illuminate psychological, social, political and economic

processes behind dynamics of radicalisation within prisons (Warnes), suicide bombings across militant groups (Gill) and in the Palestinian territories (Saarnivaara) and the possibility of 'terrorist insider trading' in the advent of bombings with the proceeds used to fund subsequent attacks (Baumert). In addition to the actions of militants, there is growing realisation of the importance of reactions to terrorism, for example approaches to 'counter-terrorism' and the implications of the extension of 'policing' across and within national boundaries into previously 'private' domains. To this end, papers are incorporated that illuminate the methods through which surveillance has extended into financial services, undertaken by 'service providers' and across national boundaries (Marron) and identify and explain different counter terrorism approaches in America and Europe (Oliverio).

Ultimately it is hoped that this special edition will contribute to more balanced, broader and nuanced approaches both to militant Islam and counter terrorism and the greater integration of contributions from academics, police and policy makers. Such an aim may appear naively ambitious. However the post September 2001 failures, exemplified by the continuing, possibly enhanced, threat from 'Islamic' terrorism[2] and deteriorating ethnic relations, suggest that such a synthesis is urgently required.

Footnotes

[1] Vertigans (2007).

[2] To describe terrorism committed by people in the name of Islam as 'Islamic' is controversial. Many religious leaders and believers argue that people who commit related attacks for 'Islam' are not Muslims. However as Marranci (2006: 31) points out with regards to the 11 September 2001 attackers, 'they felt they were Muslim' and this was an integral part of their identities. In this paper, Marranci's observation is adopted in accordance with W.I. Thomas' (1928) famous adage: if people define situations as real then they are real in their consequences. In other words, if people undertaking acts of terrorism think they are Muslims then their classification will suffice: to prove otherwise is a task for theologians and not social scientists, police or policy makers.

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