

By Lana Jarsdell

Just as Catholics are famous for their burden of guilt; so it is with Muslims and their burden of responsibility for the Ummah. From a very young age, one is taught that the plight of Muslims the world over is a single battle, one in which we are all a part.

Having been brought up in the UK, my own opinion as well as that of many of my counterparts has been shaped by the fortunate opportunity to have the best of both worlds. Living in a liberal society one is allowed to experience all aspects of life and culture, whilst at the same time maintain one's own religious and moral beliefs. My friends and I have managed to form strong relationships with those around us, openly discussing all aspects of our lives: All aspects that is apart from one.

Politics is a dirty word in Arabic, although you will never find a lack of volunteers willing publicly to voice their opinion. One need only frequent any shisha cafe from Baghdad to London to find a queue of people waiting to take their turn on the soapbox. As is the same with all other cultures, there is minimal consensus amongst general political opinion. Yet in relation to foreign policy, Arab society seems to have only one opinion; and that is that the foreign policy of western states is against the Muslim states, especially those of the Middle East.

Marc Sageman's "bunches of guys" theory suggests the biggest terror threat comes from home-grown disaffected young men who undergo the process of radicalisation together. The notion that one cannot be radicalised if one does not want to, really holds no weight in this argument. Islam is a way of life, not merely a set of rules to live by. Those who have been radicalised, who have attempted to seek revenge have been Muslim, although not necessarily Arab, or Asian. Their common denominator is their faith not their race. So singling out the Arab and Asian communities will have little effect, and possibly have the effect of making them more disenchanted.

The root problem of radicalisation stems from a lack of understanding amongst those involved of their own religion and the politics of the situations in which they find themselves. Whenever a series of crimes is investigated, the police always look for the similarities and trends. In this case, religion is the common factor. Islam teaches that unity in the Ummah is what ensures Islam continues to be a powerful force in world politics as well as a religion. In order to combat the problem of radicalisation, Islam needs to be studied and better understood.

Young disenfranchised Muslims feel that Western states have a very pro Israel and biased outlook towards the Middle East. Through the history of the 20th century, they learn of conflict after conflict that has occurred in the region. They believe, incorrectly, that a war is being waged against Islam, and therefore, waging a "holy war" in response is justifiable.

But what drives people to take up arms or board a tube train with a bomb inside their

backpack? The war on terror which they feel is being waged against the whole Muslim population, is in fact being waged against groups like the Taliban and against organisations like Al-Qaeda. According to Bruce Hoffman, the threat of terrorism comes from the ability of these groups to gain support from young men and train them to fight in the name of Islam.

The process of radicalisation has different stages. As with drugs, those close to someone who may be becoming radicalised would benefit from paying close attention to changing behaviours. The first stage usually sees someone become more religious. In some cases, someone who has never been religious, maybe did not even follow Islam very closely, may start praying often and observing more religious requirements. The individual may eventually start to enforce their opinions on others. Such changing characteristics are a clear sign that an individual may be going through the process of radicalisation.

The reasons for the link between increased devoutness and radicalisation is because when one practices Islam, and really gets into it, one gets a real sense of overwhelming peace. It's a feeling that cannot be described, but from my own personal experience and the experiences of others, when one sits and reads the stories of the prophets, and reads the Quran, there is a sense of contentment. It's a feeling which at the time makes you very aware of your shortcomings as a Muslim and brings about a feeling that you want to improve yourself in whatever way possible.

Once someone reaches this level of spirituality, it is easy for those with agendas of their own, the leaders of Al-Qaeda and its imitators for example, to manipulate them. There is more than enough propaganda that can be used for indoctrination. Even as a liberal yet practising Muslim, whose loyalties lie very much with the UK, when watching programmes like Dispatches: Children of Gaza, one begins to feel a resentment towards those who seem to unnecessarily harm the innocent. One soon tires of the same old situation where it appears to be a never ending continuous struggle and it is one rule for the West, and another for the Muslim world. In the eyes of many Muslims this is the way it comes across. So whilst terrorism is never the way to right a perceived wrong, in the minds of some individuals, they are simply doing as God has dictated in order to protect the Ummah.

Islam teaches people to fight the jihad, not only with violence, but also by spreading the word of Islam. When reference is made to violence; Islamic teachings are similar to "jus ad bellum", setting out the laws of war, which each soldier must observe. In spite of this, the logic used by these self proclaimed jihadi's is the perception that their enemy is not following their own rules, and so they have no reason to do the same. This attitude exists regardless of whether they become a part of a larger organisation or continue to act alone or within an individual group. This is the fundamental reason that we find ourselves in the same position conflict after conflict. But after all an eye for an eye will only leave us all blind.

Radicalisation can be monitored, and should be the primary issue for any authority who wish to tackle terrorism. In order to understand the enemy, one must think like the enemy. As well as trying to think like the terrorists themselves, the governments of western states must be more sympathetic in their approach to the Muslim communities in their countries. Such an approach could possibly included creating fora for discussion, and developing a further understanding of

why some individuals feel there is no other choice than to take up arms.

The situation in the Middle East has been on-going for many years, and has affected many generations, and will continue to do so if no long term solution is achieved. Such a solution has to come from those primarily affected, rather than those on the outside whose contribution is driven by their own foreign policy goals.

That said, there is no point looking to a big single event that will change the course of history. Rather what needs to happen are many small, incremental steps that will in turn allow the region to develop. There needs to be a new script written, one that sets out a definitive plan for the future that is based on conflict resolution. It should not merely attempt to resolve current issues and maintain the status quo, but rather to predict and resolve the problems that are likely to destabilise the region in the future.

What is required is for Muslim states, in Africa and Asia as well as in the Middle East, to take control of their own policies. If they feel the West is dictating to them, then they should work harder for their own people in order to give the western states less cause to interfere. At the same time, the Western states, the US in particular, need to allow these states to develop their own regimes and implement their own policies without fear of retribution. Whilst democracy, and an elected government is the norm in western society, they have not been, and nor will they be in the near future, in Asian, African and Middle Eastern states.

The new Obama administration has taken a very different stance towards the region than the prior one. Nevertheless, in order for this to make any difference, the Muslim states must themselves accept that they must respond differently from now on, as past experience has clearly proved faltering. Only if there is an inclusive and comprehensive approach will there be hope for sustainable peace in the region.