

Understanding ‘terrorism’

By Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 6 June 2017

“While we have made significant progress in recent years, there is — to be frank — far too much tolerance of extremism in our country. So we need to become far more robust in identifying it and stamping it out across the public sector and across society.

“That will require some difficult, and often embarrassing, conversations. But the whole of our country needs to come together to take on this extremism, and we need to live our lives not in a series of separated, segregated communities, but as one truly United Kingdom.”

— **Theresa May, British Prime Minister**

It is impossible to miss the sense of frustration and exasperation in Theresa May’s voice as she responds to the latest terror attack in London. She didn’t put it this way but the question which haunts her is: why are so many young Muslim men in Britain willing to take up the path of violent jihadism?

Of course, the absolute number is small. Three attacks in recent months and a dozen foiled attacks. But Britain’s intelligence agency MI5 says 500 people — and they would overwhelmingly be young men — are of the highest priority on its watch list, and that at least 3000 people actively support jihadism. Perhaps 1000 young British Muslim men took the extreme step of travelling to Syria and Iraq to fight for Islamic State’s ideals.

The British government’s counter-radicalisation program, Prevent, has been notably unsuccessful. Several mainstream Muslim organisations won’t have anything to do with it. Some local councils in high Muslim population areas won’t co-operate with it, nor will some Muslim schools.

But in this Britain is simply repeating the experience of every other Western nation. There is not a single Western nation whose experience of counter-radicalisation could be described as successful. The most that any of them could claim is that the odd person has been saved from going down a jihadist path.

May’s predecessor, David Cameron, spoke frequently and insistently on the need to counter “nonviolent extremism”.

In several eloquent speeches, Cameron argued that nonviolent extremism shares most of the jihadist ideology but stops short of advocating terrorism. That ideology consists in part of the idea that there is a giant Western conspiracy against Islam, conducted through foreign policy, international finance, Western military action in the Middle East and the policies towards Muslim minorities in Western nations.

Cameron’s point was that this ideology is based on falsehoods, but if a young man fully embraces this ideology it is much easier for him to take the final leap into believing that military action, or even terrorism, is justified in retaliation against the West.

However, it may be the problem is even broader than Cameron suggested. For the political discourse and broad culture in many Muslim societies — even notionally democratic societies such as Indonesia or Turkey, and among Western Muslims as well — includes what can only be described as myths and paranoid fantasies as a staple.

This is borne out in a series of polling data from Britain and indeed from many Western nations.

The good news is that most polls show that British Muslims overwhelmingly — often by figures near 90 per cent — believe Britain is a good place to be a Muslim. But this makes other polling results even more perplexing.

In a poll conducted last year by ICM Research for Channel Four, about 4 per cent of British Muslims, which would be more than 100,000 people, said they sympathised with suicide bombers. That result has to be treated with caution. Such a small number may or may not mean something. More significantly, only a third of respondents said they would help the authorities if a friend or relative was involved with extremists.

In a separate poll conducted for the centre-right think tank Policy Exchange, more than half of British Muslims polled said they did not know who was behind the 9/11 terror attacks in the US. More than 30 per cent believed the US government itself was responsible. About 7 per cent thought the attacks were a Jewish plot, which was fully 2 per cent more than those who thought the 9/11 attacks were the work of al-Qa'ida.

That result is startling. Al-Qa'ida itself boasts of having carried out the 9/11 attacks. Its provenance and the chain of events leading up to the attacks have been exhaustively investigated in numerous countries. Most leaders of most Muslim nations routinely acknowledge al-Qa'ida was the terrorist group responsible for the attacks. Yet only one in 20 British Muslims believes this.

That same poll showed that fully a quarter of British Muslims believe there is no such thing as extremist thought within the British Muslim community.

The paranoid style and the pervasiveness of conspiracy theories have been a feature of Muslim political culture for many years. More than a decade ago, on a visit to a university campus in Istanbul, I was astonished to find a big public display in the main student sheltered eating area devoted to the phenomenon of the Israeli army strapping Palestinian children to the front of their tanks and using them as human shields as they advance into Palestinian areas.

Whatever you may think of the Israelis, that accusation is simply preposterous, it exists in a state of complete unreality.

This year, in a series of trips to the Middle East, I have spent some time in both Jordan and Morocco, two admirably moderate and Western-aligned Arab nations that in their own ways are doughty fighters against terrorism. But two conversations — one in each country — shed some light on the nature and source of the paranoid style in Muslim political culture.

In Jordan I met a number of cabinet ministers who were impressive figures, in their region and their nation's strategic circumstances, dedicated political moderates and firm in their solidarity with nations like the US and Australia in the fight against Islamic State terrorists in Syria and Iraq.

But there was one conversation I found completely befuddling.

I went one day to the grand Jordanian parliament building to meet Abdullah Obeidat, a leading member of parliament and chairman of one of the parliament's policy committees.

Displaying full Arab courtesy, he met me on the steps of parliament. He and I and a retinue of officials strolled into the official meeting room where we sat in grand sofas and were served

sweets and tea. And his extravagant speech of welcome made me blush in unaccustomed modesty.

The first part of the interview was conventional enough — Jordan was suffering from a regional crisis of refugees and needed the world's help. Absolutely true and an entirely reasonable request for any Jordanian to make. But when I got on to the conflict in Syria and the campaign against Islamic State, which Obeidat referred to by the Arab term Daesh, the conversation became more than a little testy. "Let me tell you something," he said. "It's something I know you've never heard before. The people in Syria are now subject to the worst episode in history. The total terrorism is sponsored by the West and carried out by Russia on the pretext of protecting the Syrian people."

I wasn't sure I had heard him right, so I asked: Did you say terrorism in Syria is sponsored by the West?

"Yes, truly I stated that. Terrorism is manufactured by the West. All its intelligence agencies are operating there, sharing information with each other, and the victim is the Syrian people. All these international forces, including those involved in the bombardment of Daesh, they are pre-planned to deplete the resources of the Arab peoples and lands and to injure Islam in its image."

Obeidat's hostility to the West is combined with a characteristic wild overstatement of American, and in other contexts Israeli, power.

"This is a major point in my own point of view, is it really possible that the various armies of the Western allies could defeat Saddam Hussein in a few days but cannot defeat Daesh in Mosul or elsewhere? Is it possible to believe that all these nations are pounding Daesh and cannot win?"

As with many conspiracy theories, Obeidat's combine the strangest of bedfellows, in this case Iran and the US.

"I believe that the West stands behind Daesh. Iran is a stick being used by the West. The nuclear treaty with Iran does not serve the Arab people. Daesh is an illusion. All these terrorist groups are being sponsored by the West.

"Daesh is a Western game and the purpose is to defame Islam.

"Our religion of Islam is a religion of tolerance and love and friendship. In the Islamic books we read and study there are no extremist ideas. I raise my son to say if you have bread in your mouth and your brother is hungry, give the bread to him."

Obeidat then tells me an anecdote concerning his son, who lives in America, finding a homeless white American whom he takes to his own apartment to feed him.

One of the small notable features of a few days in Jordan is that almost everyone I met who spoke English had a son or daughter living in the US or Europe, even if, like Obeidat, they thought the West was involved in a vast conspiracy against Arabs and Islam. The only time in our conversation when Obeidat's flow faltered was when I pointed out that Jordan itself undertakes aerial strikes against Islamic State targets in coalition with the US in Syria. Obeidat did not care to criticise the Jordanian government.

I have often read of views like Obeidat's but it was in its way enlightening to have them expressed so forcefully and at such length.

A few weeks later, in Morocco, in one of the most fascinating conversations I have had, I got a completely contradictory explanation of the modern Arab mindset.

In a venerable office overlooking the ancient Medina of Rabat, I had a long discussion with Ahmed Abbadi, secretary-general of the Rabita Mohammedia al-Ulema, or Council of Religious Scholars.

Most of our discussion dealt with why Morocco, at official and popular level, has been able to generate such a strong mainstream Islam resistant to extremism.

Of course, Moroccans living in Europe have been radicalised and overall perhaps 3000 young Moroccans went to Syria or Iraq fight with one or other of the jihadist groups. But Abbadi sketches for me the outlines of a grand Moroccan history, through which his country was mostly an independent kingdom, never colonised by the Ottoman Turks and only briefly subject to European colonialism. It grew its own independent and self-confident traditions of Islam, its moderation buttressed by the prestige of the monarchy and by the tradition of independent, moderate scholarship in the nation.

His combination of complete mastery of his own society's history, of Islam generally and, crucially, of all the trends in the West is highly impressive and more unusual in the Middle East than I would have imagined.

Finally I bring him round to the question of why so many young Muslim men are attracted to violent jihadism.

"There is nothing more dangerous than a youngster who is bored and angry," he says. "Then someone gives them some fun and links it to grand principles."

He outlines an impressive list of youth outreach activities that his organisation sponsors, but I persist in seeking from him some explanation of the paranoid style — my words, not his — in Muslim political culture.

"You cannot miss that there is now a kind of stigmata in Muslim societies that bases itself on repetitive grievances."

These grievances are not all fake, nor are they all genuine. He lists 10 — 1. The sense always of an anti-Muslim conspiracy. 2. The legacy of colonialism, and that the West has not paid the Muslim world reparations for this period. 3. Israel and the grievances of the Palestinians. 4. The double standards which Muslims believe see them more criticised than members of other religions. 5. The humiliation of Muslims in the Western media. 6. The actions of Western militaries in Iraq and Afghanistan and now Syria.

These six are all highly contestable but have some basis in reality. The next four are much more far fetched. 7. The alleged robbery of Muslim wealth by the West. 8. The infiltration of Western values into Muslim societies and Muslims in the West through Hollywood. 9. The falsification of history, to the detriment of the historic achievements of Muslims by the West.

And then 10, the constant reporting, almost all of it wrong, that a copy of the Koran has been burned by some enemy of Islam somewhere.

The constant repetition of these claims ultimately warps Muslim political culture.

Abbadi says: “The Koran has more than 6000 verses. Only 250, or 4 per cent, touch on laws.

“So 96 per cent of the Koran, where all the beauty and ethics are, is neglected.”

I don't mean to present Abdullah Obeidat as a bad person. Our discussion, though emphatic, was limited and conducted through an interpreter.

But there is a kind of dialogue in the Islamic world today between the grievances and the dark fantasies of the Abdullah Obeidats, and the poetry and vision and common sense of the Ahmed Abbadis.

And on that dialogue hangs a world of pain or redemption. In the past this has been essentially a dialogue for Muslims. Now it is too important for that. Every Western society has a central interest in who wins that contest of ideas.