

faith-based

**Is Your Muslim Doctor the Enemy?**

How terrorist groups target middle-class Muslims.

By Eboo Patel

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It's no accident that the suspects in the recent suicide-bombing attempts in the United Kingdom were doctors. Al-Qaida and other terrorist groups want you to think your Muslim doctor or dentist or lawyer is the enemy—and so that's how they're recruiting. Terrorism, we are learning, is more than heinous murder and guerrilla theater. It is a type of macabre magic intended to create the illusion of enemies everywhere. In traditional, territorial war, the enemy is obvious, and the mission is clear: Kill the guys with red helmets, capture that hill. In asymmetrical, ideological war, it is hard to tell friend from foe.

Which is why you don't need an actual army to win an asymmetrical war. All you need to do is play a game of smoke and mirrors about "us" and "them." This is the age-old tactic put to particularly effective use by al-Qaida, which wants us vs. them to be the West vs. Muslims. To that end, one of its goals has been to convince the world's 1.3 billion Muslims that the West is their inherent and inevitable enemy and to join a violent campaign against it. Osama Bin Laden made this clear in his [much-quoted 1998 statement](#): "(To) kill the Americans and their allies—civilian and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible. ..." This *fatwa* went nowhere. There are tens of millions of Muslims who live in North America, Europe, and Australia, all with ample opportunity to strangle their neighbors, shoot up a McDonald's, or blow up a bus. Only a tiny handful have tried.

So, al-Qaida turned to a strategy of staging dramatic attacks under the assumption that Muslims around the world were so angry at the West that once they saw a "strong horse" (in Osama Bin Laden's words) stand up to the paper tiger, they would join the global jihad. But this approach also failed miserably. The truth is, most Muslims who live in the West like it here. An April 2007 Gallup poll found that 74 percent of Muslims in London stated they felt "loyalty to Britain," compared with 45 percent of non-Muslims. A May 2007 Pew survey found that Muslim Americans, by a 2-to-1 margin, see no conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in America. The Pew report concluded that Muslims in America were "largely assimilated, happy with their lives, and moderate with respect to many of the issues that have divided Muslims and Westerners around the world." This more than anything else, I imagine, galls Bin Laden and his cohorts.

Since al-Qaida cannot convince a majority of Muslims to go to war with the West, it is using Plan B: Create the illusion that all Muslims are part of this army and hope to incite suspicion, insults, and attacks directed at Muslims and Islam. A leaked [2005 memo](#) from 10 Downing Street states that al-Qaida "recruiters" intentionally target educated, middle-class Britons, typically at university campuses. They seek candidates who come from liberal or nonreligious Muslim backgrounds, people who are so seamlessly a part of British society that the reaction to their participation in a terror plot provokes universal disbelief. That was certainly the case with both Mohammed Sidique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer, two members of the July 7, 2005, London Tube bombing. Khan was a well-respected teacher in Leeds whose wife was an advocate for women's rights. As a child, he wore cowboy boots and insisted on being called "Sid," signs of his fascination with all things American. Tanweer was a sports fanatic, sang along to Elvis Presley songs, and drove around town in his father's red Mercedes. The headline in the *New York Times* said, "Suspects' Neighbors Say There Was No Hint of Evil."

Other terrorist groups have shown that poor, uneducated people—even children—are perfectly capable of

carrying out terrorist attacks. So, why go to the trouble of recruiting doctors and teachers? Because middle-class professional terrorists play a trick on people's psychology. The instinct of "I can't believe that a doctor would do this" quickly morphs into, "You can't trust any of those Muslims." For some people, this provokes open season on Muslims. Mosques are torched, Muslim kids are beaten up at school, women in headscarves are harassed, the Prophet Mohammed is depicted in a despicable manner.

None of these affronts even comes close to the evil of terrorism, but each allows al-Qaida to entrench its definition of us and them. "See," they say to Muslims, pointing to the [Danish cartoons](#) and the broken windows of mosques, "the West hates Islam and seeks to destroy Muslims. Your only choice is to fight them." Some Muslims buy that line.

This seems to be what happened to [Mohammad Asha](#), the young Jordanian doctor of Palestinian descent accused of playing a key role in the London/Glasgow terror plot. A brilliant medical student from a family of physicians, Asha's parents and professors insist he had no interest in political Islam while in Jordan. A friend of his, speaking to the United Kingdom's *Daily Mail*, said that Asha had become radicalized at the hands of [extremist recruiters](#) in Britain. The issue they used to stir his rage? The Danish cartoons defiling the Prophet Mohammed.

The way to win this war is to define *us* and *them* based on clear principles and resist all divisions based on religion or ethnicity. The central principle *we* stand for is pluralism, the commitment to a society where people with different beliefs live in equal dignity and mutual loyalty. People who believe in pluralism come from all backgrounds—Christian and Muslim, believer and atheist, Arab and American.

*Their* central principle is totalitarianism, the conviction that one group should dominate and everyone else should suffocate. Totalitarians are an equally diverse but much smaller population. But there is a somewhat larger group of people who are susceptible to the totalitarian message, especially if they feel like the pluralists have already written them off.

Sun Tzu wrote in the *Art of War*, "If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle." Every time a mainstream Muslim is accused of being a terrorist because of his accent, his beard, or his prayers, we violate our central principle and erode our essential identity. Every time the sacred symbols of Islam are desecrated, we arm the enemy. The sooner we learn this lesson, the faster we win this war.

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