

## GATEWAY DOCUMENT 4.2

# Terrorism claiming religious justification

## WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Many people have been affected by terrorism and the fear of terrorist acts. It is an emotive and sensitive topic and this makes it difficult to tackle in a classroom setting. It is a constant reference point in the media and the frequent reports associating terrorist groups with Islam have a negative impact on public perception of Muslims in Britain and worldwide. The frequent linking of terrorism, violence and religion, together with the questions this raises, is at the heart of the work of *REsilience*.

In some situations terrorists are members of small groups which command little support or respect but have the power to inflict great damage and pain on the victims of their attacks. In other situations terrorists are the tip of an iceberg; they are the ones who are prepared to take violent action against those they define as enemies, but they may have sympathisers who support their general cause even if they are not prepared to engage in terrorist acts themselves. The nature of terrorism is to sow the seeds of fear. Young people are not protected against this as potential victims, nor are they immune to the possible 'glamour' of the destructive power of terrorist violence.

## KEY QUESTIONS

### How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

The issue of terrorist acts carried out in the name of religion provides opportunities to consider a range of questions. These include:

- Why do some people turn to terrorism and what is their goal in doing so?
- Is there a distinction between war in general and acts of terrorism?
- What is meant by the concept of 'the just war' and what limits are placed on the violent actions of nations by international conventions?
- Are there any distinctions between terrorism in general and acts of terrorism carried out in the name of religion?
- What impact does terrorism have on civilian populations?

- In what situations might it be reasonable to claim that an end justifies the means used to achieve it?

### **Why is this a contentious topic?**

The terms 'terrorism' and 'terrorist' are often used as political labels. Sometimes they are used indiscriminately to condemn an entire segment of a population. Those labelled 'terrorists' by their opponents rarely identify themselves as such; rather they would describe themselves as separatists, freedom fighters, liberators, revolutionaries, vigilantes, militants, paramilitaries, guerrillas, rebels or patriots. It is not unusual for both parties to a conflict to describe each other as terrorists. The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is full of examples of groups that were condemned as terrorists during their military campaigns (e.g. for freedom from colonial rulers) but whose members are now described as freedom fighters, for example members of the military wing of the African National Congress fighting against the apartheid regime in South Africa.

### **Why is RE relevant to this topic?**

The major world religions all include teachings about justice, authority and the use of violence. They may have teachings and associated criteria, which justify violence in some situations, such as the Just War theory in Christianity (see Gateway 4.5, particularly its appendix). Some groups, including, for example, Jains and many Hindus and Quakers, reject violence as a means of achieving an end, no matter how just the cause. The concept of martyrdom has also been present in world religions throughout history, a martyr being somebody who suffers persecution and death for refusing to renounce a belief; the term is sometimes also used in the context of, for example, suicide bombers.

An RE lesson is an appropriate place to talk about the arguments and practices of terrorism and violent action when they are carried out in the name of religion. It is also a safe place to explore the wider context, such as people's needs for justice, freedom and identity and the ways in which people can try to change the world and make it a better place, including the alternatives to violence.

### **What classroom challenges might arise in RE?**

Students may identify with a cause, if not the methods used to pursue it. Many Muslims feel that western policy in the Middle East is unjust and guilty of applying double standards. Most unequivocally reject terrorism as a response, but still feel anger and a sense of betrayal. A similar situation was often evident during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Many people who were against terrorist violence still felt some sympathy for those acting to draw attention to powerlessness and injustice.

There may be strongly held views on both sides of a contentious situation. Some students may take the view with regard to the conflict in the Middle East that, for example, Palestinian militants are fighting to liberate their country from Israeli occupation and that their acts of terrorism are understandable given the situation. Others might feel that the government of Israel is justified in taking harsh military action against them to protect its own people and

their security. Students, their families, teachers and local communities may have sympathies or personal connections with particular political, nationalist or religious conflicts and may have very strong feelings about the issues.

### **How can teachers address such challenges?**

- Students can explore issues of justice and injustice and some of the religious responses to them.
- Students can explore the alternatives to terrorist violence in democratic societies: lobbying, consultations, political activism etc and also questions around who has or should have the authority to declare war (e.g. the government of the day? Military personnel? Religious leaders?).
- Links with citizenship education can enable pupils to consider the courses of action people can take to improve a situation when democratic means fail. In terms of learning about terrorist violence, this means thinking seriously about the human cost of terrorist acts and the question of the circumstances in which it might be claimed that the end justifies the means.
- Potentially harmful materials may be encountered on the internet and students should be helped to identify them and understand the dangers they may present (see also Gateway 2.13).

## **NEXT STEPS**

### **Signposts for further reading**

Aslan, Reza (2005), No god but God. The origins, evolution and future of Islam, Random House

Burke, J (2006), On the road to Kandahar: travels through conflict in the Islamic world, Penguin (an accessible account by a Western journalist rather than a scholar, this nevertheless provides a very well informed analysis of the context for Al Qaeda inspired terrorist activity)

Esposito, J. and Mogahed, D. (2007), Who speaks for Islam? What a billion Muslims really think, Gallup

Juergensmeyer, Mark (2001), Terror in the Mind of God, University of California Press

Townshend, C. (2002), Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction, Oxford University Press.

### **Signposts for further resources**

[www.gandhifoundation.org](http://www.gandhifoundation.org) For non-violence as a religiously inspired political alternative, see a wide range on Gandhi-inspired action.

[www.threefaithsforum.org.uk](http://www.threefaithsforum.org.uk) For action against polarising and stereotyping in a religious context, see the work of the Three Faiths Forum.

[www.theatreveritae.com](http://www.theatreveritae.com) This is a theatre in education resource developed by the Theatre Veritae company which explores specifically Al Qaeda inspired terrorism in a current British context. It can be put on as a Theatre in Education performance or schools can use the DVD and playscript. It provides an effective way of exploring the issues and the impact on people involved from many different perspectives.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in\\_depth/world/2001/war\\_on\\_terror/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/world/2001/war_on_terror/default.stm) This BBC website, focused on 'Investigating Al Qaeda', is updated on a regular basis and has information about the history, ideology, personnel and terrorist actions by Al Qaeda related terrorists.

[http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/tna/+/teachernet.gov.uk/\\_doc/13111/ompep.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/tna/+/teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/13111/ompep.pdf) This case study is about the Oxford Muslim Pupils' Empowerment Programme, an educational resource devised by Imam Monawar Hussain that seeks to address questions raised by Muslim pupils at a school in Oxford. They include: *What is Jihad? What does Islam say about suicide bombings? Is it legitimate for British Muslims to go and fight British troops in Afghanistan and Iraq? How should we deal with people of other faiths and none?*

### Signposts for further action

- Explore possible links with the school's citizenship programme of learning.
- Consider use of a theatre in education production to explore the issues effectively.
- 'Best of British Islam' is a set of DVDs which covers a range of issues including a programme on the 7/7 bombings. These DVDs can be obtained free of charge from the RE Council by sending a request to: [info@religioueducationcouncil.org.uk](mailto:info@religioueducationcouncil.org.uk)

## APPENDIX

### An example of terrorism claiming religious justification: the 7/7 bombings

#### The events of 7/7 in London

On 7th July 2005, four bombs were detonated on the London public transport system during the morning rush hour. Huge explosions took place in three underground trains and one double-decker bus; 52 people were killed and more than 700 wounded, some of them very seriously. It soon became clear that this had been a series of coordinated terrorist attacks and that the perpetrators were four young British Muslims who themselves died in the explosions.

#### The terrorists' background

The four men, Mohammad Sidique Khan, Hasib Mir Hussain, Shehzad Tanweer and Germaine Lindsey, were outwardly unremarkable and only one, Khan, had previously come to the attention of the security services. The first three had grown up in the Pakistani

heritage communities of the Leeds area and although all took their religion seriously there had been nothing in their behaviour prior to the bombings that had aroused suspicion on the part of friends or family. Hussain had once written, 'Al Qaida No Limits' on his RE book at school, and apparently regarded the 9/11 bombers of the World Trade Center in New York as martyrs, but he had not been seen by others as a potential or actual religious extremist. Khan, Hussain and Tanweer appear to have spent a good deal of time socialising at local mosques, youth clubs, gyms and an Islamic bookshop but there is no clear evidence that they spent time planning a terrorist attack.

Germaine Lindsay's background was rather different; born in Jamaica, he moved to Britain as a child and when his mother converted to Islam he did so as well and was noted for his aptitude for learning to recite the Qur'an. He was disciplined at school for handing out leaflets supporting Al Qaeda but otherwise did nothing to draw attention to himself from a religious or political point of view. He lived in Huddersfield for a time and this may be where he met Khan.

### **Al Qaeda and its ideology of violent jihad**

The main information about the men's motivation in carrying out their attack came from Khan's video statement, broadcast on Al Jazeera television channel in September 2005. In it he justified carrying out violent attacks on Western targets because of the atrocities he alleged were carried out 'against my people all over the world'. He linked his act to 'today's heroes like our beloved Sheikh Osama Bin Laden ... and all the other brothers and sisters that are fighting ...' His main focus appeared to be on the importance of martyrdom as a symbol of commitment to Islam.

These themes – the fierce antagonism to perceived injustices perpetrated by the West against Muslims and the desire for martyrdom – are strongly present in the ideology of the Al Qaeda network. One of its principal stated objectives is the recreation of a single, unified Islamic nation, the Caliphate, as existed in the early centuries of Islamic history (and indeed in a weakened form until it was abolished in 1924 following the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War). A pre-condition for Al Qaeda's re-establishment of the Caliphate would be the end of 'Western occupation of Muslim lands' (e.g. in Iraq and Afghanistan), as well as the removal of regimes in Muslim countries that were seen as un-Islamic or too sympathetic to the West. The Al Qaeda leadership issued a fatwa (religious ruling) in 1992 that called for a jihad against the Western occupation of the 'lands of Islam'.

Al Qaeda is a loose series of networks and cells whose members are often inspired rather than organised by a central Al Qaeda directorate; there appears to be no such central organisation. As its influence developed during the 1990s, a number of sympathisers with the aims of Al Qaeda in the UK, including both British born and foreign nationals, began to work in support of the Al Qaeda agenda.

Religious justification of this kind of terrorism relies on the selection (and many would say, distorted interpretation) of particular texts from the Qur'an and the hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). It is a modern version of the Kharijite ideology that emerged in 7<sup>th</sup>

century Arabia but was defeated by the mainstream Muslim state. The key features now are the emphasis on the importance of martyrdom and its rewards in Paradise. People who take part in suicide bomb attacks appear to be willing recruits, drawn in by a strong sense of commitment to their interpretation of Islam and by bonding and solidarity with their violent extremist group; a hatred of 'the other' is a key feature of their narrative.

(see also Gateway 4.5 Jihad)