UNCOVERING THE ROOTS OF TERRORISM

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE SPECKHARD

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Anne Speckhard, Ph.D. is an expert on terrorism. Her research projects include the study of the radicalisation process of Muslims in Belgium, France, United Kingdom and the Netherlands and the study of the psychosocial and political aspects of suicide terrorism in Chechnya, Palestine, Morocco, Iraq and Uzbekistan and radicalisation to terrorism in Europe. She has consulted to the foreign ministry and/or security forces of the United States, United Kingdom, and Singapore and also to NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Jasper Schellekens interviewed her on a quiet morning in her house in Brussels over a cup of coffee and a glass of gazpacho.

T*ERRORISM IS RAMPANT IN THE MEDIA.*
Every day there is news about terrorist activities, real or suspected. Clearly the media plays an important role in establishing what we know and think about terrorism. How important is the media and in what way is it influencing peoples' perceptions and reactions to terrorism?

A.S.: These days the media is the main instrument through which terrorists amplify their effects of killing only a few persons. The more horrific and bloody their acts, the greater the witnessing audience and the deeper the political impact, which is what terrorism is all about – using violence to target civilians to influence the political process. Most people today fear terrorism, not because they have had some direct experience with it, but because of what they have seen on television, on the internet, heard on the news and read in print media. We have to find ways to make our populations more resilient so they fear terrorism less, as it kills relatively few people.

Another current issue is that the media often portrays Islam as the problem, when in reality the problems are far more complex than simply blaming any confession or religion. Muslims as a

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group are highly represented in immigrant populations and are also often people of colour who face serious societal discrimination. The media often highlights the crimes that low income Muslim people commit without also highlighting the fact that they are low-income, face societal oppression, unemployment and hopelessness. If we begin to address these very real issues, we may find that the values inherent in the Muslim faith can lead people who believe they can earn enough to live, will do so, honestly and with a real sense of decency and concern for the poor. The Muslim faith actually has a lot of tenets that strongly agree with Christian, Jewish and widely held humanitarian values. It attaches great importance to honesty, decency, charity, justice and respect for all human beings.

Today we do see a lot of terrorism attached to religious ideology and this ideology is frequently using a hijacked form of Islam, but truthfully all religions have been used to justify violence and there are many groups that use terrorism that are not religious at all.

Although the results of terrorist activities are evident, the causes of terrorist behaviour are less evident, but perhaps more important. What do you think are the main causes of radicalisation and to what degree do you think they are psychological or social?

A.S.: First of all terrorism on the level of the group using it, is by definition political – it is violence against civilians used to influence a political process. On the individual level however there are two distinct paths to radicalisation and one occurs in conflict zones and the other in non-conflict zones. The causes in both areas can be analysed on four levels: the terror group; its ideology; the social support for terrorism; and the individual vulnerabilities that cause a person to seek out or respond to a terror group and its ideology. The psychosocial reasons for radicalisation in a conflict region are usually revenge, suffering, and occupation by a foreign group and often times this is a group that doesn't share the same religion. In a conflict zone you see people that lost a family member to political violence, were subjected to severe and long lasting humiliation, or saw someone wounded or deeply hurt or terribly humiliated in front of them. Angry and upset, they often want to express their outrage and even want to take revenge. And if they are also deeply traumatised – they are shook to their core – and as a result are in search of a

new sense of meaning to understand this cruel world they now live in. But trauma, wanting revenge, or being highly upset is not enough. The lethal mix that makes for terrorism is when these vulnerabilities on an individual level are met with a group that is encouraging terrorism, that puts forward an ideology that meets these psychological vulnerabilities in a way that motivates individuals to take part in political violence and when society also begins to support both the group and its ideology – then you have terrorism taking off. Then traumatized individuals meet their psychological pain by radicalising in terrorist groups because they lack other good options for addressing their psychological pain. On the level of the group, terrorism is often used because the group concludes that they are blocked or non-influential in the political process, they lack other useful weapons or they believe that terrorism is the most useful mean for them at that point in time to influence politics.

In non-conflict zones on an individual level it's a different path. When we look at terrorism in non-conflict areas like Europe, we're looking at Muriel Degauque, a Caucasian European convert to Islam, who drove a car-bomb to explode herself into an American military patrol in Iraq; we're looking at Casablanca, where fourteen young Moroccan men from the slums went on suicide missions in 2003; we are looking at the London metro bombings, and Madrid and so forth. In those cases it is based on relationships and ideology. In the conflict regions leaders of terrorist organizations can play upon a deeply traumatised psyche, in a non-conflict zone you need some other individual vulnerabilities to prey upon. These vulnerabilities are usually marginalisation, a sense of worthlessness to society, lack of hope for the future, and anger over societal dynamics. A lot of recruitment in non-conflict locations happens in networks and has a lot to do with building a positive sense of identity and a sense of belonging and having a purpose despite feeling rejected by society. Instigators of terrorism in these groups generally use trauma as a motivator in addition to showing pictures and films of the conflict areas in order to induce a sense of secondary trauma.

You went to Palestine to interview family members, senders, and friends of suicide bombers and also Israel to interview imprisoned suicide bombers. When you interviewed them how did you feel? Were you afraid at any time?

A.S.: Was I afraid? No, not really. I decided to do the research and put myself in God's hands. I did my very best in presenting myself as an honest and caring person who just wanted to understand how Palestinian terrorists think and act. Most of the people I was lucky enough to interview understood that I really do care. I think they were glad to have the opportunity to talk to someone who could help them to understand themselves – I am a clinical psychologist with twenty five years experience. In Beit Foreek and in Gaza City two terrorist groups discussed the possibility of taking me hostage. I was afraid on one level, but on another I discussed it with them rationally and told them I had considered it, but first of all, I didn't think I was a very valuable hostage and that

it would just end in all of our deaths. Secondly, I asked them if I could I keep doing my research during my captivity, which made them laugh. And finally, I just treated them with respect and dignity. I even discussed with them why they might want to kidnap me and why that might be good for them, discussing the pros and cons very objectively and realistically and they seemed to respect that – that I cared enough for them to take their point of view into account. I think when you truly respect another person then that person feels it and it forms a bond between humans that makes it harder for them to act violently. Having said that, I do realise that in Gaza kidnapping has now become the norm and that I may have fallen prey to that if I had gone there some months later. All the same, I was not afraid.

What I did fear was becoming a victim in a fight between the Palestinian terrorists whom I was interviewing and the Israeli soldiers who were hunting them down. I continually banked upon my hope that the Mossad (Israeli military police) somehow knew where I was and I hoped they would not kill me accidentally or otherwise in one of their raids. But I knew it was a real possibility and perhaps this knowledge deepened my understanding of what Palestinians live with each and every day – the fear that they might die even though innocent of any crime. I'm not saying the terrorists are innocent, but there is a lot of collateral damage on the Palestinian side and I realised I could become one of the victims of such a battle.

When you talked to the relatives of suicide bombers or other terrorists what did they think about what their relatives had done or tried to do?

A.S.: I really came to understand that they did not rejoice at the death of their loved ones. If possible, they would have prevented it in most cases and they truly grieved the loss. Their grief and anger really moved me.

It seems many countries are unsure of how to handle and counter terrorism. Each country takes steps towards the prevention of terrorism. Europe has many groups that are somewhat isolated from society where extremist ideas may gain strong footholds. Is Europe taking effective steps to prevent and reduce radicalisation?

A.S.: As I see it Europe needs a very strong civil rights movement and if European governments were smart they would take it into their own hands and not wait for the minority groups to coalesce around militant ideas that encourage terrorism, and for these groups to take it into their own hands – to force changes through violence. I would love to help train European Muslim leaders in non-violent methods. But I would want to be sure to do it in a truly productive way.

Do you think they would be willing to do this?

A.S.: Yes. They are. I talked to some of them. They are very interested, but you have to be careful about who you support and be sure of their motives. American Muslims in particular are in a really advantageous position to help, since American Arabs are much more integrated into society and suffer much less discrimination, although after 9/11 discrimination has increased. Muslim American activists can give a lot to European Muslim activists and teach them non-violent ways of achieving political goals, such as equality, economic integration, and so forth.

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America and Europe have a different way of approaching the threat of terrorism and radicalisation. America actively seeks to implant its ideals on those who live there, while Europe allows immigrants more freedom to formulate their own ideals. Both of them have had certain successes as well as downfalls. Would it be a good idea to establish some connection between American and European Arabs?

A.S.: The United States Embassy in Brussels did establish this connection. Their Ambassador, Mr. Korologos, organised a programme called American Belgian Muslim Dialogue. He invited Muslim activists from the United States and activists from the Belgian Muslim community to speak to each other for three days. There was no agenda other than to speak about the main problems each community faced and identify solutions. If then they proposed programmes that they wanted to work on jointly he would try to get funding for them. With this initiative he created a room full of energised and excited people. I thought that was wonderful and I would love to see it repeated. He is very proud of it and rightly so. When we promote dialogue and self-efficacy we usually get a good result.

Is this a project that can be repeated in other countries and with even more people?

A.S.: Yes, I think it's something that can be repeated, and I hope they do. But it is only a way of encouraging dialogue, exchange of ideas and peaceful activism. The real problems in society such as discrimination, self segregation of certain communities, militant ideologies, instigating for terrorism and the injustice through out the world – within conflict zones and even here in Europe – still need to be addressed and initiatives like that will not deal with the real problems, but they do open dialogue and help activists to tackle real problems with real answers. I'd like to take it even further than that and make some educational training programmes for Muslim radical leaders. If we can reach some of these radical leaders and convince them that embracing violence does not work but embracing non-violent methods and getting highly involved in the political process works we might see more changes. If we can train effective minority group leaders to use some of the methods used by American civil rights leaders and avoid mistakes they made it might help. In America, we had Malcolm X and we had Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King is a hero and people have mixed feelings about Malcolm X. I would hate for Europe to end up with the Black Panther mentality – Muslims resisting with violence what they see as discrimination in "self defence". You see this now with the militant *jihadists* in Europe. They are already acting. They acted in Spain, they acted in London, they've tried to target the US Embassy in Paris, and they've tried things here in Belgium as well. Why are people motivated to join these groups? They are marginalised, upset, unemployed, and feeling blocked from the political process. They see grave injustices both at home and throughout the world. They feel ignored and they feel like there are no solutions and are convinced in

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some way that violence works. This is what the Al Suri's and Osama bin Laden's of the world have convinced them of – to answer these problems with violence. They need to be equally convinced that there are better ways to engage in the political process. Non-violent means are actually extremely effective. They have worked in South Africa, the United States, and India.

If a person wants to promote Islam the way they think it is, how could they resort to non-violent means when nobody will listen? Since many societies are very closed to these extreme views how will people get extremist views across without violence?

A.S.: I would love to see Palestinians and other European radical leaders introduced to the concepts of non-violent protest. Nelson Mandela, Ghandi and Martin Luther King all won huge battles using non-violent means. I have talked to many Palestinian leaders and to some radicals in Europe about this. We need to become more creative in our approaches to militant *jihadist* ideas. Many of their ideals are ideals most of us agree with – valuing peace, human dignity, equality, social justice and so forth, but their ultimate vision of society may not be the same as ours and the means that they are willing to use to bring change are violent. Perhaps we can open dialogue on what we agree on. We can convince at least some leaders to try non-violent means if we wish to do so. I would like to see this take place both here in Europe and throughout the Middle East. It has worked to topple dictatorships and other corrupt regimes and practices elsewhere.

You said earlier that non-violent means are actually extremely effective. It surprises me that fervent followers of a cause would choose a violent method over a more effective peaceful method. Are violent solutions more popularised than peaceful means?

A.S.: Yes, of course. If you read the Al Qaeda type ideology, listen to their tapes, open their internet sites you see violence highly endorsed. Even in preaching in Europe in many circles violence is given as the answer by highly charismatic leaders. I think it would be useful to identify equally charismatic leaders and give them some really good training in non-violent methods to equip them with the tools to try to bring the justice that Al Qaeda-type groups are screaming for. All moral people want social justice we just differ in how we define it, and how to work towards it. And of course violence grabs media attention, where non-violent methods have to be very creative to get the same media attention. Terrorism is very effective in grabbing headlines.

There is another way. Namely, for European leaders to take it into their own hands and to start making positive quotas and some kind of affirmative action and really push for minority and Muslim inclusion in leadership to be involved in decision-making policy. I think old Europe is really struggling with the demographic changes that have occurred over the last fifty years – the dramatic changes in ethnic and religious groups. Europe is no longer what it once was. Nowadays Europeans must find a way to include the Muslim minority groups and their leadership to participate in making legislative decisions in essential and key roles: not just "face value" involvement, but serious engagement.

They must seriously engage the Muslim community and work in the communities. All of Europe has its hotbeds of radicalisation, which are in need of good programmes to offer them political involvement to begin to address their own problems.

European leaders also need to enforce the civil rights laws and address civil rights issues. If they do not do this they may face a violent or non-violent reaction from those who are being discriminated against. Of course, it would be better if the civil rights laws where enforced, because then it would be coming from the top down instead of bottom up. I actually think that is better and less risky that way. When the bottom layers of society get upset enough and the changes begin to be demanded from the bottom up there is going to be some level of chaos and self-organization and it is going to take on a life of its own: nobody is necessarily going to control it and guide it along a non-violent path. I would absolutely hope it would go the Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King way of non-violence, but you can never know for sure. That is why it is much better to address the problems proactively from the government side.

If I were a European politician I would be doing everything possible to work with the leaders in these communities, making sure that the civil rights laws on the books are good laws and making sure that they are enforced. And I can tell you for sure that those laws are not being enforced, in Belgium at least. If you apply for a job in Brussels as a person of Moroccan, Algerian, or Tunisian descent you are very unlikely to get it and you may even get insulted when you go for the job interview. Together with other researchers, I have tested this by various methods – sending nearly identical resumes in with Arab and non-Arab names to find that only the non-Arab is invited to the job interview but the Arab is told the job is already filled. In nightclubs these Belgian second and third generation immigrants are also often turned away – I have personally witnessed this countless times. There is huge discrimination and if you talk to these young men, you will see that they have a building anger inside of them. Of course they feel angry and sad being barred from society.

Would it help to have an outlet to express this anger?

A.S.: Yes, but it would help more if this discrimination did not happen. On the books there may be just laws, but they are not being enforced right now and that has to change. I would say make some serious penalties. I would also say we need to educate. I know my father never changed diapers and my father-in-law did not either; they rarely cooked and did not clean the bathroom. Nevertheless, both of their sons are extremely liberated men who do everything and *expect* to do everything. From one generation to the next there was a huge shift in mentality and it was due to the women's rights movement and an increase in consciousness. And for me that is amazing and that is proof that from one generation to the next it is possible to change mindset and behaviours. If we start working now with children when they are around six to ten years old and start discussing gender roles, religious tolerance, militant *jihadist* ideologies – where it is true to the fundamentals of the Islam and where it is false and not the true call of the Prophet – I think that we could get a similar shift in mindset. Europeans can be creative and start with

prevention by teaching young children how to handle these things, learning that violence is not the way to work things out. We teach kids to avoid AIDS, to be safe on the Internet, to watch out for traffic when crossing the street, we teach them not to litter. We basically continuously educate and influence the values of children. And I think we can teach them to be more culturally sensitive and to be more open to the things that need to happen in Europe on both sides of the street.

A democratic society allows for people to establish their own schools. Immigrants have the possibility of attending their own Islamic schools. Do these segregated schools prevent the influence of democratic education?

A.S.: Yes they can, but it does not necessarily have to be so. School curricula can be monitored and tolerance encouraged. The most important thing is what is happening in the wider society and why people are wanting to self-segregate. I would say the answer is education and incentives. The international school in Brussels has a programme that is called "Safe Schools for Everybody" which is all about tolerance. If you do not subscribe to this you cannot go to school there. Even private schools can be required to teach certain topics and their curricula can be monitored. Another way to encourage integration is by building a Sports club with all the facilities a kid wants and allow access only if they are culturally tolerant when they are there. Anybody that is intolerant will be kicked out. Right now in Belgium at least we often have the opposite – the nightclubs, which are where the young people like to go at night on the weekends, are essentially barred to immigrants of Arab descent. So they are told in effect, "You are Belgian but we don't want you." What kind of message is that? And how do you think a young man responds when a militant group says, "We *do* want you and we can give you a real purpose, positive sense of identity and mission to your life."? That is a bad mix – these two things juxtaposed.

In the West people are so good at selling things; they can sell Coca-cola all around the world and do you think Coke really tastes that good? It is a fizzy chemical-tasting drink that is bad for you and we sell it everywhere. So why not sell cultural tolerance? Why not put some money into selling it? If we can sell something that does not taste good and is bad for you, then we should be able to sell something good.

Then you only have to pretend for a few hours?

A.S.: Pretending changes you. It makes you think and you will have to interact with everybody. These are real experiences, not just pretend. In Europe many students take a gap year out of college. Why not make a prestigious youth corps where young people in a gap year can run sports clubs and do great activities to help minority children or help their parents with job training, help the kids and their families with language training, and all kinds of other things to get young people on the right track: reaching out and integrating. It is possible to make a society where immigrants find a way to integrate and want to do so. We have to work for that, not just pretend.

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