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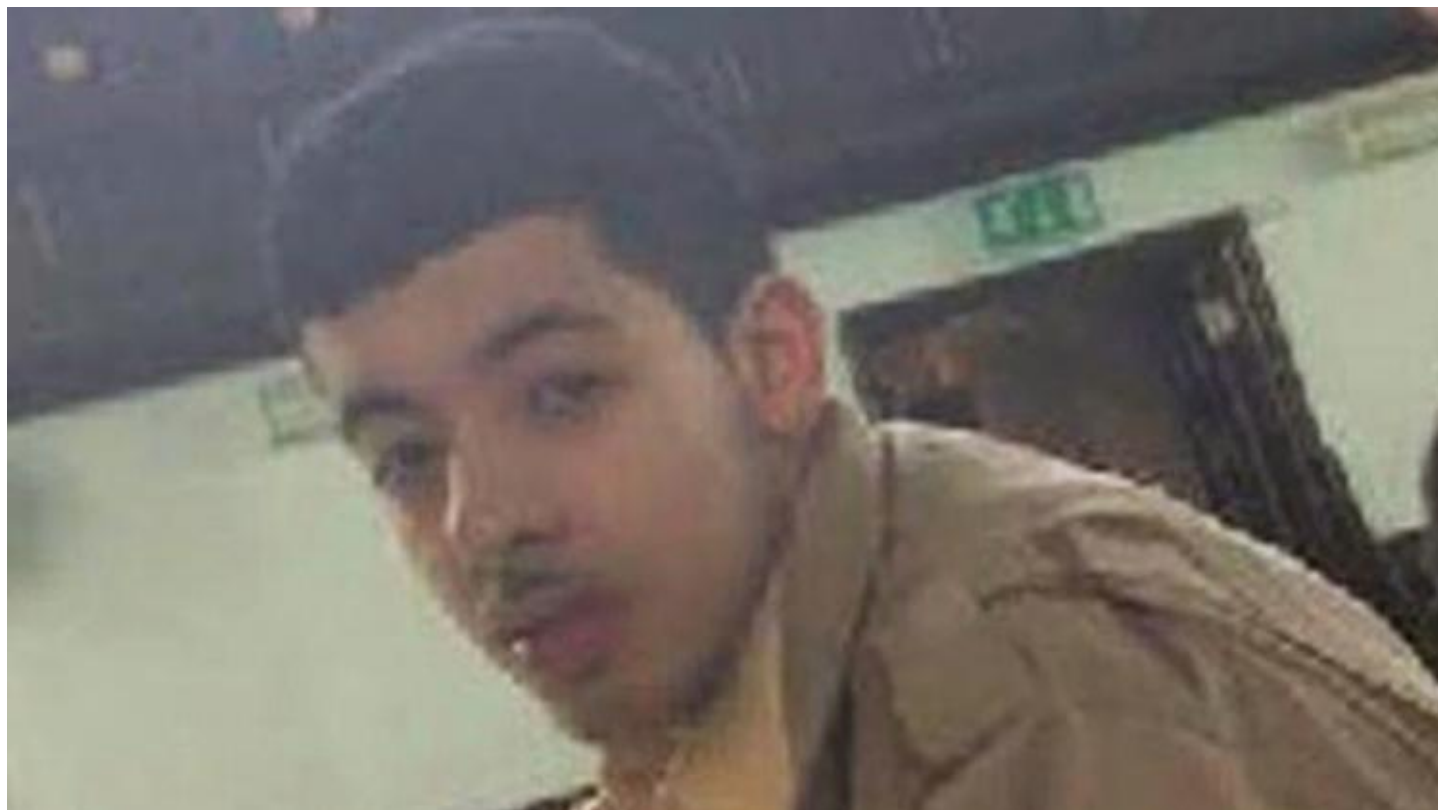
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Op-Ed All that we'll never know about Manchester bomber Salman Ramadan Abedi



British authorities identified Salman Abedi, pictured, as the bomber who was responsible for Monday's explosion in Manchester which killed more than 20 people. (Associated Press)

By **Simon Cottee**

MAY 24, 2017, 1:05 PM

The most natural questions to ask about the Manchester terrorist attack are also the most intractable: Who was the perpetrator, and what caused him to carry it out?

His name, revealed on Tuesday, is known to us: [Salman Ramadan Abedi](#). He was a British-born 22-year-old of Libyan descent from Manchester, and he was on the radar of the British security services. He attended Salford University but dropped out in the second year of a business and management degree. More details are certain to emerge over the coming days and weeks.

Often, the implicit working assumption in the “who” question is that it will help unlock the mystery of the “why” question. But this assumption rarely bears fruit. Nearly always it is frustrated by the parents, friends or acquaintances of the terrorist, whose testimony — faithfully relayed by journalists in what has become a standard ritual of reporting — attests to the all-too-human traits of the person obliterated by the “terrorist” label: to his ordinariness, to his decency, to his banal enthusiasms and affinities. (Abedi was a Manchester United supporter.)

Whenever a terrorist atrocity occurs, we expect a monster, someone roughly equivalent to the monstrosity perpetrated. But nearly always our expectation is defeated and we are confronted with the glaring discrepancy between the act and the person who authored it. Because the actions are so monstrous, we so badly want the actors to be monsters, but they rarely are.

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People are prone to lie about their motives, either to others or to themselves, so as to preserve their moral self-image.

According to a [Guardian news report](#), Abedi was “a slightly withdrawn, devout young man, always respectful to his elders.” This is disconcerting: First, because it eliminates the distance between the perpetrator and us, raising all kinds of uncomfortable questions. If Abedi — this ordinary, respectful person — could do what he did, then who else among the vast community of ordinary souls is capable of such a monstrosity (my neighbor, my brother, my son, *me*)? Second, it complicates the “why” question. If the perpetrator was indeed a monster, then the mystery of the “why” is dissolved and the explanation revealed: It was his monstrousness that caused him to act so monstrously. But what if the perpetrator is not a monster?

In the absence of monstrousness, the natural inclination is to search for motives or reasons to understand the atrocity. But this too is fraught with difficulty. A motive or reason is an inner subjective state that explains what caused someone to act. Accordingly, motives are difficult to recover, because they can't readily be empirically verified. You can't see a motive, and often the rationale for an action isn't always clear even to the person who performs it. As terrorism scholar John Horgan has acknowledged, “The most valuable interviews I've conducted [with former terrorists] have been ones in which the interviewees conceded, “To be honest, I don't really know.”

At best, one can only intuit or surmise a motive, based on a searching examination of a person's interests, beliefs and the wider context in which he acted. But even here the project of explanation is massively complicated and constricted by several factors.

For example, even in cases where people have carefully and fully explained their actions, either before or after carrying them out, what is presented is often less a guide to their inner subjectivity and drives than a self-serving catalog of justifications or excuses for doing what they did. So instead of providing a neutral account of a person's actions, author-verified “explanations” serve to explain only why they were right or justified in acting, rather than explaining why they acted.

New York University law professor Stephen Holmes puts it in this way: “Sometimes people do what they do for the reasons they profess. But private motivations cannot always be inferred from public justifications.” In other words, people are prone to lie about their motives, either to others or to themselves, so as to preserve their moral self-image.

A second and related complicating factor is the way commentators explain jihadist atrocities by identifying the reason or cause that most readily coheres with their own politics and wider philosophical view of the world. For left-leaning intellectuals, the primary reason or cause is secular, anti-Western political grievance. For sociologists, it is any number of social ills, including alienation, anomie, racism, anti-imperialist war and Islamophobia — but almost never religious imperatives. For some right-leaning politicians and commentators, it is the theological edicts of Islam itself. Invariably, the reason or cause identified turns out to be the very thing to which that explicator is diametrically opposed.

Who was Salman Ramadan Abedi and what caused him to murder and maim so many young people at Manchester Arena on Monday night? No matter how hard we look and probe, we may never know who Abedi “really” was, for the simple reason that he is or was, like everyone else on the planet, more or less unknowable at the level of the core self. This is made all the more difficult by the monstrosity of his deed, for which every significant experience or gesture in his tangled life-history is set to become pregnant with a retrospective meaning, as if it somehow anticipates what transpired Monday night.

And however much we learn about Abedi’s radicalization and beliefs, or about any possible psychic wounds he encountered in his short life, there remains an inordinate causal abyss between all this convoluted human entanglement — into which so many like Abedi are immersed — and the singular act of murdering innocent teenagers at a pop concert. No amount of expertise or knowing is likely to fully bridge that gap and make the inexplicable explicable.

Simon Cottee is a visiting senior fellow at the Freedom Project, Wellesley College. He is the author of “The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam.”

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