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EXTREMIST ISLAM

Why Jihadists Want to Kill

- **SIMON COTTEE**

Jun 5 2017, 10:53am

We must understand that it's a death-wish that attracts would-be jihadists toward the ideology of jihadism, not the other way around.

On Saturday night, seven people were brutally murdered in a jihadist attack on London Bridge and Borough Market. Scores more were critically injured. It is the third terrorist attack in the UK in as many months.

"Things need to change," said British Prime Minister Theresa May in a speech the morning after the carnage of the night before. May is right about that. But everything she said was a regurgitation of the same old script: "While the recent attacks are not connected by common networks, they are connected in one important sense. They are bound together by the single evil ideology of Islamist extremism that preaches hatred, sows division and promotes sectarianism."

"Defeating this ideology," she continued, "is one of the great challenges of our time", adding that it "will only be defeated when we turn people's minds away from this violence and make them understand that our values – pluralistic British values – are superior to anything offered by the preachers and supporters of hate".

May is right that "pluralistic values", British or otherwise, are superior to the values of hate. But the overwhelming focus of her speech was misplaced. Extremism didn't drive a van into defenceless civilians on London Bridge, nor did it go on a stabbing rampage at Borough Market: three, as yet unnamed, men did that; men who were stopped not by a counter-extremism message, but by armed police.

The relationship between murderous violence and ideology isn't as straightforward as May implies. Ideology gives shape to grievances and personal crises, and supplies the script for justifying violence. So its causal importance can't be denied. But ideology doesn't in itself cause violence. For lethal violence to happen there needs to be competent agents with a desire and readiness to perform it.

May is also right to insist that the ideology of extremism should be fought: hateful ideologies should be repudiated and exposed. But this won't stop jihadist attacks, because the causes of these attacks can't be reduced or simplified to an ideology.

Jihadist attacks occur first and foremost because the attackers want to kill and die. This, as Olivier Roy has trenchantly argued in his recent book *Jihad and Death*, is the

unmistakable message of their actions, and it is everywhere emblazoned in their jihadi talk. But because the attackers use the rhetoric of religion to justify their attacks, shouting "Allahu Akbar" or "this is for Allah" at the moment of slaughter, this blunt fact is obscured and the focus shifts to the role of Islam in "driving" the attacks. What is obscured is that the desire on the part of the attackers to kill and die invariably precedes their exposure to the jihadist ideology.

To put it another way: it is the wanting – the killing and death wish – that animates would-be jihadists toward the ideology of jihadism, not the other way around. We need to better understand this wanting, but May and her government show little interest in figuring it out.

For over 18 months, ISIS has lost huge swathes of territory and is a shadow of its former self. But it has left a deadly legacy: the call and warrant for murderous violence on the streets of the West. Some have already responded to this – and more will surely follow their murderous example. But the warrant is already out there and known. It cannot be undone or erased from collective memory. And no amount of proselytising against Islamist extremism and for British values, whatever they are, will stop wannabe-jihadists from seeking out the permission of the warrant.

And let's be clear. No one, as terrorism expert Peter Neumann has repeatedly pointed out, is radicalised because they "stumble" across extremist content online and become "brainwashed". On the contrary: people actively search out extremist content so that they can become radicalised, because they want to be radicalised, because what they really want is permission to lose themselves to a violent cause. As Roy puts it: "Jihadis do not descend into violence after poring over sacred texts... They do not become radicals because they have misread the texts or because they have been manipulated. They are radicals because they choose to be, because only radicalism appeals to them." And the core reason for that appeal, according to Roy, is that it gives expression to their profound disaffection and self-loathing.

There is very little that any government can do to derail the delusions of a tiny fringe of disaffected, self-hating young Muslims in search of a cause. The more immediate challenge, however, is stopping jihadist plots. This isn't going to be easy. It will require greater manpower, better intelligence and some luck. It will also require building better trust with the communities from which the terrorists come. A renewed focus on questioning Islamic religious conservatism is unlikely to help in this.