

# Just don't call it war

*Boris Johnson says it is time to reassert British values in the face of extremist Islam*

**Boris Johnson**



*A policeman stands guard on Colwyn Road in Beeston. Photo: Steve Parkin/AFP/Getty Images*

If we were Israelis, we would by now be doing a standard thing to that white semi-detached pebbledash house at 51 Colwyn Road, Beeston. Having given due warning, we would dispatch an American-built ground-assault helicopter and blow the place to bits. Then we would send in bulldozers to scrape over the remains, and we would do the same to all the other houses in the area thought to have been the temporary or permanent addresses of the suicide bombers and their families.

After decades of deranged attacks the Israelis have come to the conclusion that this is the best way to deter Palestinian families from nurturing these vipers in their bosoms, and also the best way of explaining to the death-hungry narcissists that they may get the 72 black-eyed virgins of scripture, but their family gets the bulldozer.

No doubt there are some people in Britain — I can think of at least one Daily Mail columnist — who would approve of such tactics; but we are not Israelis, and we are novices not just at dealing with suicide bombers, but with suicide bombers as British as the fish-and-chip shops in which they grew up. They were born in our NHS, these killers. They were coddled by our welfare state, they were fed on our butties and our Spangles, they played cricket on our glum and bemerded streets. They were washed by the rains

and blessed by the suns of home. They have in their houses (or, perhaps, scattered in fragments at four London Transport crime scenes) documents in which Her Britannic Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs requests and requires that the bearer be given all the deference and precedence that is the due of a British national.

They were not metics, or the second-class citizens of the Occupied Territories. We cannot build a wall against them, or erect turnstiles on the way into London, foul-smelling pissoirs of the kind that connect the West Bank and Israel. So we have to focus — in the way that only this kind of slaughter can make us focus — on what we should do now to stop people like them hating us so much that they want to kill us. Something so scorched these fools in their young male psyches that they were prepared — in at least one case — to leave wife and child, and to take their own lives and the lives of dozens of other Britons.

In groping to understand, the pundits and the politicians have clutched first at Iraq, and the idea that this is 'blowback', the inevitable punishment for Britain's part in the Pentagon's fiasco. George Galloway began it in Parliament; he was followed by Sir Max Hastings, with the Lib Dems limping in the rear. It is difficult to deny that they have a point, the Told-You-So brigade. As the Butler report revealed, the Joint Intelligence Committee assessment in 2003 was that a war in Iraq would increase the terror threat to Britain. Anyone who has been to Iraq since the war would agree that the position is very far from ideal; and if any anti-Western mullah wanted a text with which to berate Britain and America for their callousness, it is amply provided by Fallujah, or the mere fact that Tony Blair cannot even tell you how many Iraqis have been killed since their liberation — only that the number is somewhere between ten and twenty thousand.

Supporters of the war have retorted that Iraq cannot be said to be a whole and sufficient explanation for the existence of suicidal Islamic cells in the West, and they, too, have a point. The threat from Islamicist nutters preceded 9/11; they bombed the Paris Métro in the 1990s; and it is evident that the threat to British lives pre-dates the Iraq war, when you think that roughly the same number of Britons died in the World Trade Center as died in last week's bombings.

In other words, the Iraq war did not create the problem of murderous Islamic fundamentalists, though the war has unquestionably sharpened the resentments felt by such people in this country, and given them a new pretext. The Iraq war did not introduce the poison into our bloodstream but, yes, the war did help to potentiate that poison. And whatever the defenders of the war may say, it has not solved the problem of Islamic terror, or even come close to providing the beginnings of a solution. You can't claim to be draining the swamp in the Middle East when the mosquitoes are breeding quite happily in Yorkshire.

The question is what action we take now to solve the problem in our own country, and what language we should use to describe such action. The first step, as we swaddle London and Yorkshire with Police/Do Not Cross tape, is to ban the phrase 'war on terror', as repeatedly used by G.W. Bush, most recently on 7 July in Edinburgh, with Blair nodding beside him. There is nothing wrong in principle in waging war on an abstract noun; the British navy successfully waged a war on slavery, by which they meant a war on slavers. But if we continue to say that we are engaged in a war with these people, then we concede several points to the enemy, and set up a series of odious false equivalences.

For 30 years we fought something called the Irish Republican Army, and it was always an axiom of our anti-terrorist strategy that we did not accept the self-description of these thugs as 'soldiers'. This wasn't a war, we said; this was murder. They weren't soldiers, these men whose apologists now draw parliamentary expenses (so showing an interesting partiality in our 'war on terror'). They were just killers, we said; not military figures, but criminals. So why do we now call it war? Why glorify the actions of these Yorkshire maniacs? Why do we hand them this right to be recognised as belligerents, when we do not even understand their war aims?

At least the IRA had comprehensible geographical objectives: to reverse the partition of Ireland. What do these folks want? Do they really want British troops out of Iraq, when most people I met in Baghdad secretly or openly want them to stay and help fight the insurgency? Is it really the injustices of Palestine that get their goat? Is that what makes a young cricket-loving Beeston lad go and top himself? Is it the continued existence of the house of Saud? Or were they all so seriously maladjusted to modern Britain, and found it so hard to get girlfriends that they went down the Tube in search of the hur, the 72 black-eyed ones of paradise that some Islamic scholars believe to be correctly identified not with virgins but with raisins?

If we are baffled by them, it may be that they find our own motives equally puzzling and suspicious, and that, too, is why it is a bad idea to talk of a general 'war on terror'. There are plenty of people in Iraq who think Britain did a wonderful thing in helping to get rid of Saddam Hussein, and it is still too early to reach a final verdict on the success of the Iraq war. But it was surely a mistake to continue, in spite of all the evidence, to present this invasion as part of the 'war on terror'. It became obvious to everyone that Saddam did not possess weapons of mass destruction, and it is easy to see why Muslims might suspect that there must be another explanation.

To the paranoid Muslim mind, the evident bogusness of the 'war on terror' — in so far as it applied to Iraq — suggested that the war was really about something else: about oil, about humiliating and dominating the Islamic world; and because they make no separation between religion and politics, the bogus 'war on terror' seemed to imply an undeclared war on Islam, and that was an impression that neither Bush nor Blair properly corrected. If the neocon project means democracy throughout the Middle East, and

Starbucks, and women being able to drive, then I am an ardent neocon. Just don't call it war.

There has been a fatal elision between the 'war on terror' and the campaign to democratise the Arab world, and many Muslims can be forgiven for thinking that this is really a war to democratise the Middle East in the interests of General Motors, evangelical Christianity, Hollywood and global pornography. No wonder they dislike it; and if we use the vocabulary of war, it gives the maniacs all the more excuse to wage war on us. When Bush said, 'If you are not with us, you are against us,' and then invaded Iraq on charges that were frankly trumped-up, he co-opted tens of millions of Muslims into the camp of his enemies, even though they might loathe Saddam. They had nowhere else to go.

To keep talking of war plays on militant Muslim paranoia, and, incidentally, since it is a key point of Islamic theology that the suicide bomber may not be called a martyr, and therefore entitled to his ration of virgins/raisins, unless he dies in 'war', we are by our own vocabulary offering these people an incitement to murder and a laissez-passer to paradise. Above all, misplaced talk of 'war' is a distraction from the real disaster, which is that we have a serious and long-term security problem, not in Iraq but in this country, among young men who speak with Yorkshire accents. This is a cultural calamity that will take decades to correct.

We — non-Muslims — cannot solve the problem; we cannot brainwash them out of their fundamentalist beliefs. The Islamicists last week horribly and irrefutably asserted the supreme importance of that faith, overriding all worldly considerations, and it will take a huge effort of courage and skill to win round the many thousands of British Muslims who are in a similar state of alienation, and to make them see that their faith must be compatible with British values and with loyalty to Britain. That means disposing of the first taboo, and accepting that the problem is Islam. **Islam is the problem.**

To any non-Muslim reader of the Koran, Islamophobia — fear of Islam — seems a natural reaction, and, indeed, exactly what that text is intended to provoke. Judged purely on its scripture — to say nothing of what is preached in the mosques — it is the most viciously sectarian of all religions in its heartlessness towards unbelievers. As the killer of Theo Van Gogh told his victim's mother this week in a Dutch courtroom, he could not care for her, could not sympathise, because she was not a Muslim.

The trouble with this disgusting arrogance and condescension is that it is widely supported in Koranic texts, and we look in vain for the enlightened Islamic teachers and preachers who will begin the process of reform. What is going on in these mosques and madrasas? When is someone going to get 18th century on Islam's mediaeval ass?

It is time that we started to insist that the Muslim Council of Great Britain, and all the preachers in all the mosques, extremist or moderate, began to acculturate themselves more closely to what we think of as British values. We can't force it on them, but we



should begin to demand change in a way that is both friendly and outspoken, and by way of a first gesture the entire Muslim clergy might announce, loud and clear, for the benefit of all Bradford-born chipshop boys, that there is no eternal blessedness for the suicide bombers, there are no 72 virgins, and that the whole thing is a con and a fraud upon impressionable minds. That might be a first step towards what could be called the re-Britannification of Britain.

There is much more to be done, not least in the treatment of women. But we should not call it a war, whether cultural or military. The language of a 'war on terror' may help the government to pass its illiberal measures, such as the ID cards that would have been of no assistance whatever against last week's bombs, but it is profoundly dishonest. Britain is not at war. Even if you include last week's fatalities, the number of deaths from terrorism is falling across the world; indeed, the world has seldom been more peaceful since the age of the Antonine emperors. The more we talk of war, the more we big up the terrorists, inflame suspicions across the Muslim world, and give power-crazed politicians the chance to force through some liberty-eroding measure. Last week's bombs were placed neither by martyrs nor by soldiers, but by criminals. It was not war, but terrorism, and to say otherwise is a mistake and a surrender.

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