

COMMENT – "The idea that Sweden's first suicide bombing was a logical consequence of Muslim oppression is mad", Nathalie Rothschild writes.



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When the Iraqi-born, British-educated Swede Taimour Abdulwahab blew himself up on a Stockholm street teeming with Christmas shoppers on the day before his twenty-ninth birthday, the international image of Sweden as an open, neutral and fairly harmonious nation imploded, too. After all, back in 2004 Osama bin Laden himself said al-Qaeda would not 'strike Sweden' because it is not part of what he sees as the crusading West.

Luckily, Abdulwahab, like his predecessors the pantsman and the shoe bomber, was utterly incompetent and so he was the only fatality in the incident. Unsurprisingly, though, his bombs have triggered a lot of national soul-searching in Sweden.

'What went wrong?', many are now asking.

What is shocking is that many commentators are actually taking the crackpot Abdulwahab's self-confessed motivations seriously and are suggesting that it was only a matter of time before Sweden felt the force of Muslim anger. Some are even suggesting that Swedes' attitudes to Muslims drove him to this desperate act.

In an email sent to a Swedish news agency just minutes before he set fire to his car and then, seemingly prematurely, triggered a bomb wrapped around his waist, Abdulwahab wrote: 'Thanks to Lars Vilks and his paintings of the Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, and your soldiers in Afghanistan and your silence on all this so shall your children, daughters, brothers and sisters die in the same way as our brothers and sisters and children die.'

A nihilistic attack on the modern world

Written by Nathalie Rothschild

Wednesday, 22 December 2010 10:48 - Last Updated Wednesday, 22 December 2010 21:30

Some Swedish commentators have suggested that not only are these sentiments understandable, but that they also explain why Abdulwahab sought revenge on behalf of his 'brothers and sisters' by attempting to kill and maim scores of Stockholmers out buying Christmas presents for their friends and families.

Considering Western countries' discrimination against Muslims at home and support for the 'American crusade' in Afghanistan, suggested one leading columnist, it is not hard to see why some self-styled martyrs would want to 'hit back'. Similarly, two human rights activists wrote that 'we have to remind ourselves that we have, after all, chosen to send troops abroad to participate in armed conflicts'.

The co-founder of a prominent political magazine was baffled that so many of his fellow Swedes were shocked by the suicide bombing. After all, he said, Sweden has experienced 'political violence' for decades. Under this rubric he lumped together such disparate events as the killings of two Social Democrat politicians (in 1986 and 2003), the presence of Swedish troops in Afghanistan and the fact that some Swedish citizens have joined jihadi groups. 'How long is it possible to remain surprised?', he asked.

Yes, Sweden has contributed 500 soldiers to the international force in Afghanistan since 2002 (someone forgot to tell bin Laden) and Muslims in Sweden and beyond were indeed insulted by the Swedish artist Lars Vilks' depictions of Mohammad as a dog. But if Abdulwahab's rage really was fuelled by the Swedish state's contribution to the war in Afghanistan and alleged compliance with Islamophobia, then why not make his point by blowing himself up outside the parliament or the Ministry of Defence or another presumed hotspot of Muslim oppression? Why attack shoppers at the height of the Christmas season in particular?

We still don't know for sure whether or not Abdulwahab was a member of a bigger network, whether he acted alone or whether he got instructions from some fellow Mujahideen somewhere. But what seems quite clear is that his botched mass slaughter does not represent an anti-imperialist, anti-racist struggle so much as the revenge of an aggrieved, twisted loser disgusted with consumerism and the mores of the West. (Even if it is true, as an al-Qaeda-affiliated website now claims, that Abdulwahab was on his way to blow up the offices of a newspaper linked to the Mohammad cartoons, such an assault could hardly be deemed to be a progressive anti-imperialist act.)

Targeting shoppers, revellers and symbols of modernity has become the hallmark of Islamic terror attacks in the West. In Britain, Islamists have planned – and tried – to blow up nightclubs, shopping centres and football stadiums. In London, Madrid and Bombay commuters have

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become victims of Islamic nihilists. In New York, one of world history's most flabbergasting monuments to human ingenuity was the target of fundamentalists.

If it is true, as has been claimed, that Abdulwahab worked as a sandwich board man on the busy shopping street where he blew himself up, he would have had plenty of time to build up resentment towards the thousands of consumers passing him by each day.

This kind of disgust with regular people and their materialist ambitions is not just the preserve of nihilistic nutjobs; in fact, it is very mainstream in the West today. It does not spring from some mysterious Eastern religious ethos so much as from the columns of trendy commentators and the campaigns of lefty activists. After all, the run-up to Christmas in particular is a time when ordinary people splash out, take pleasure in buying and receiving stuff and spend their hard-earned cash on eating, drinking and being merry – all while being scorned and berated for doing so by the anti-consumption brigade who say this is bad for our health, our psyches and the planet.

But in Sweden, Abdulwahab's action has been widely described as some kind of logical consequence of Western suppression of Muslims. Indeed, the news of the bombing had barely sunk in before newspaper column inches were filled with speculation about the effects of faraway wars on Sweden's Muslims and a demonstration against racism was organised.

Many are saying that, while suicide bombing is unacceptable, it is also understandable since Islamophobia is leading to the marginalisation of Muslims. The implication is that Swedish people's discrimination against Muslims (in Afghanistan and at home) led to Saturday's events. Coming in the wake of the right-wing Sweden Democrats' electoral successes and the arrest in southern Sweden of a man believed to be a racist serial killer, Abdulwahab's deed is adding to an already tense discussion about integration and racism.

But to suggest that Islamophobia is the real culprit is unhelpful and insulting to all Swedes, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. In truth, most Swedes actually know that Muslims living in Sweden aren't generally trigger-happy maniacs. And Swedish Muslims also know that they are not compelled by their religion to commit such senseless and cruel actions as the self-professed Islamic martyrs carry out. To say that Islamophobia inspired Abdulwahab is to excuse his actions and insult Muslims, who are depicted as loose cannons waiting to explode.

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Much is still unknown about Abdulwahab's trajectory from normal, young immigrant in a small town in southern Sweden to a bloodied corpse on a wintry Stockholm street, via his presumed 'radicalisation' in the multiracial English factory town of Luton. What is unquestionable, however, is that he was a contemptuous nihilist, expressing his disgust with the Swedish public in the most violent manner.

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