

MARTYRS, MANTRAS AND THE CASUALTIES OF WAR



Jean Charles de Menezes. The name lived in relative obscurity and will slip away, in similar terms, over the coming weeks. It does, however, sum up the futility of much that comes to be symbolised by 'the war on terror'

At some point, a full list of the innocent victims of the London bombings will be drawn up. There will be places to pay tribute to those who died; documented accounts of the arbitrary ways in which suicide bombers take the lives of innocent civilians far more than they take war combatants. But the name of Jean Charles de Menezes is unlikely to figure in any of these lists. In case you are still puzzled, Mr de Menezes was the young electrician, on his way to work, who made the mistake of wearing a padded jacket and running from the police into the London underground in the days after the bombs went off. Seven bullets to the back of his head added another number to the death toll, but only a small sliver of the press have paid any attention

(or tribute) to him in the lists of the innocent. It may have been different if he had been white, rather than Brazilian and vaguely 'foreign looking'. No matter, we are told that a 'shoot to kill' presumption is part of the new reality of policing that we all have to get used to in the on-going war on terror. No one asks, whether this is just a victory for the terrorists or why Britain chose to ignore the warnings of the anti-war movement – that this was where the war on Iraq would take us – long before the Prime Minister signed up to Bush's oil-jihad on Iraq.

In fact, Iraq is the one connection specifically ruled out in all Downing Street 's responses to the bombings. When the Prime Minister insists we must all move on after the Iraq war, it is as though we are to pretend it never happened or has no causal connection with events that follow. It enters a world that would seek to make up history as it goes along.

For the record, al Qaida had no platform of support in Iraq prior to the war. Now it is an open recruitment ground. Although the US government talks of plans to cut the 135,000 troops it has stationed in Iraq after next spring/summer they will only do so if Iraq can be tied up as a puppet state: bound by a US-written constitution and tied to contracts that have all been assigned to US multinationals. The on-going occupation has little to do with Iraqi security. The majority of Iraqis now attribute the bulk of their security problems to the presence of American troops rather than the risk of withdrawal. Press reports of suicide bombings and ambushes conveniently omit to mention the increasing tendency of US troops to see all Iraqis as potential suicide bombers, and adopt their own 'precautionary' shoot-to-kill policy.

US soldiers recently shot in the head, the police general in charge of Iraq 's serious crime squad. It comes in the midst of frequent shootings of innocent Iraqi drivers and passengers in the war on terror.

The process not only recruits more terrorists than it kills, it also creates a network of community support for those who strike back against excesses by the State or the occupying army. Britain should think long and hard about this before accepting shoot-to-kill as a first line (rather than last resort) of

anti-terrorist policies. Real gains will come through the politics of inclusion rather than from assassinations. It is one of the other lessons we should learn from history.

In the years that followed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Britain and America sponsored its own jihad in the Muslim world, as a way of driving the Russians out. The CIA even financed training camps in northern Pakistan, where the brave mujahedin could be equipped for their part in the war on communism. Kids could get a Kalashnikov more easily than an education. More went into the mountains than into state schools. But when the Russians left the fighters ceased to be heroic. As soon as they clashed with other US interests in the region they became the new fanatics.

Today's talk of forcing Pakistan to close the religious schools (madrassas) that are seen as the breeding grounds of fanaticism overlooks a more damning reality about the country. Across huge tranches of it, almost 70% of the state schools have closed because there is no money and no teachers. No inroads will be made against fanaticism and terrorism unless poverty, ignorance and exclusion are tackled first. It is the unresolved agenda of injustice that threatens us most. So too, with the role that States are being asked to play internationally. The incessant demands are for laws, policies and practices that control the citizen in the interests of broader extra-territorial interests.

The control of mullahs and mosques, the reigning in of 'troublesome priests', the surrender of civil liberties and the silencing of political critics are all seen as essential State tools in response to threats that come from what Bush refers to as "the enemies of civilisation".

In Iraq, citizens have been trying to define this threat in different terms. We heard very little in Britain about the general strike of Iraqi oil workers that took place on July 15th this year. It was in opposition to a fundamentalism of a different kind.

The West had been working on privatisation plans for Iraqi oil long before the March 2003 invasion. As soon as the bombing stopped, senior executives from Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Conoco and BP were all parachuted in on 'rescue' missions. Every company with a petrol tank to fill called for Iraq's oil to be privatised. But the oil-mullahs knew that some sort of camouflage would be needed. The language of free-market fundamentalism changed to talk of co-production rather than crude privatisation.

This new theology talks of 'production sharing' in the same way that Apartheid sought to espouse the doctrine of separate development. Essentially it just hands oil development (and revenues) to outside corporations, and ties it up in legal agreements that Iraqi governments cannot challenge or change. This is the market fanaticism that ordinary Iraqis are beginning to rise up against; the threats to their own civilisation driven by the theologies of greed, hatred and intolerance.

Britain is knee-deep in the process. Foreign Office officials have been working on "fiscal and regulatory issues" in Iraq that will prevent future governments from reclaiming their own oil. We talk glibly about the tyranny of religious states, imposing brutal, unchallengeable orthodoxies on their citizens. And yet we do the same with free-market fundamentalism.

The right to live in open, tolerant societies, free from fear or persecution, has to be fought for in the face of those who would divide and exploit us all. It is a struggle as much against those who would take innocent lives and prospects by economic means as against those who do so by suicide bombs. We cannot

pretend that one is an outrage and the other not.

alansimpsonmp.co.uk Labour 