

July 17, 2005

The Sunday Times - London

## **Islam is a weapon that can be turned against the suicide bombers**

JUDEA PEARL

The horrific bombings in London last week drew immediate response from dozens of Muslim leaders and organisations worldwide, condemning the attacks as barbaric acts that stand contrary to the teaching of Islam.

In London, 22 Islamic scholars gathered at the Regent's Park mosque to denounce the killings. The bombings were "utterly criminal, totally reprehensible and absolutely un-Islamic", they said. The men who carried out the attacks "should in no sense be regarded as martyrs".

Their statement sounded unequivocal, but unfortunately secular condemnations, however sincere, are ineffective when dealing with fanatics capable of such irrational and cruel crimes.

It is only through the formal instruments of the Islamic religion — declaring such acts as suicide bombing to be apostasy, fasad (corrupting the principles of Islam) and kufr (falsifying the roots of Islam) — that the Muslim majority can hope to penetrate the shroud of self-righteousness that licenses killings in the name of God. And

it is only through religious excommunication that Muslim communities can disassociate themselves from those who have defiled their religion.

These considerations were keenly recognised by the spiritual leaders of the Spanish Muslim community. On March 11, commemorating the first anniversary of the Madrid train bombings, 75% of all clerics associated with the Spanish Muslim Council issued a fatwa against Osama Bin Laden, calling him an apostate and urging others of their faith to denounce the Al-Qaeda leader.

This brave and unprecedented move — most welcome to families like mine whose children have been murdered by Islamic extremists — generated only a meagre response from leaders of the great mosques in the Middle East, but sent an important symbolic message worldwide. It demonstrated that western Muslim clerics do have the Islamic credentials and jurisprudential justification to issue such fatwas. Further, it has accentuated the disingenuous stance of some clerics in the Middle East who refuse to denounce, in religious vocabulary, acts that they have proclaimed to be contrary to the teachings of Islam.

The horrific events in London offer a unique opportunity for British Muslim clerics to join their Spanish brethren and issue a fatwa (ruling) against Bin Laden — the arch symbol of the ideology that led to the bombings.

And it can be broadened to include all those who advocate the targeting of innocent civilians to express political grievances.

Those who have already joined the ranks of Al-Qaeda are not likely to be swayed by fatwas issued in Britain. However, to the thousands of potential recruits who equate the logic that licenses killing with the teaching of Islam such fatwas may well be a wake-up call to recognise the distinction between the two.

Muslim clerics in the Middle East will eventually follow suit, for they cannot afford the risk of eroding their moral authority in the Muslim diaspora.

British Muslims now have the moral platform to echo and amplify the Spanish fatwa, both to help preserve the image of Islam and to reduce the risk of future terrorist attacks. The victims' families deserve the courage that such a move entails.

*Judea Pearl is president of the Daniel Pearl Foundation, which promotes intercultural dialogue and is named after his journalist son who was murdered in Pakistan in 2002*