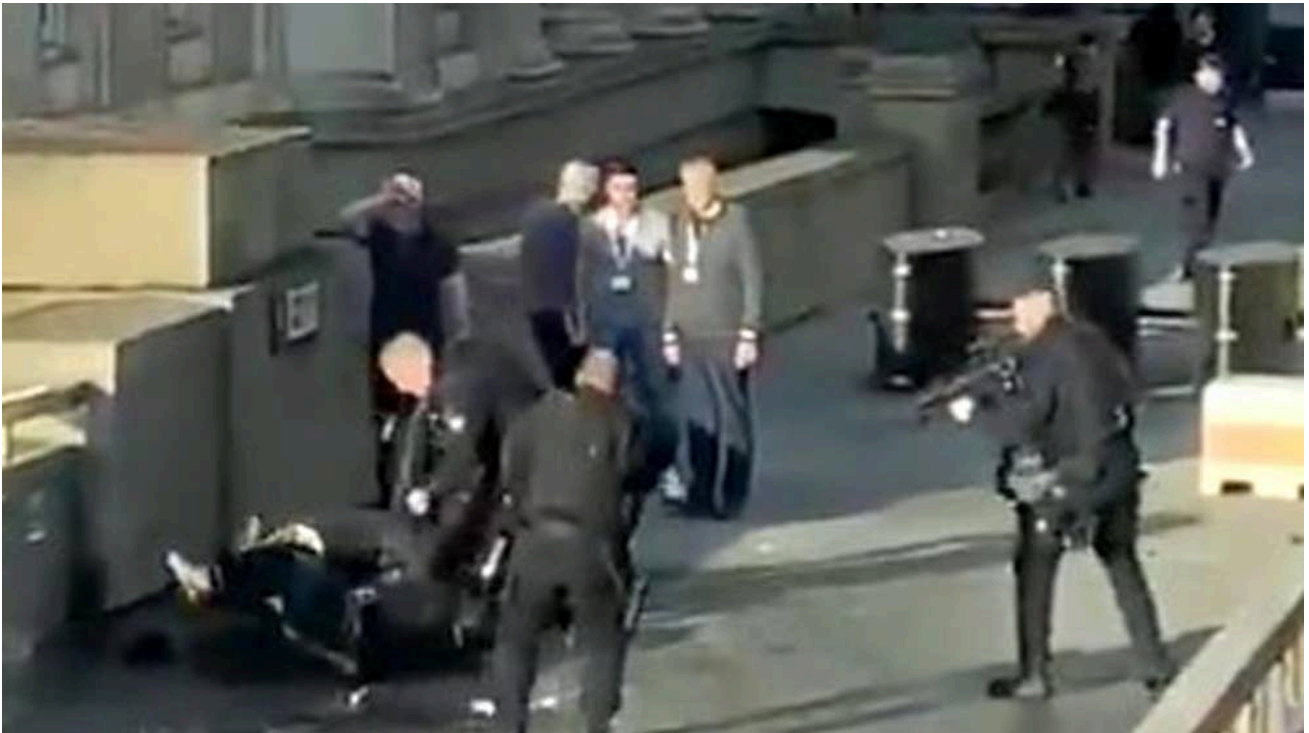


# Deadly Superstitions in London

Another terrorist attack reveals Britain's delusions about rehabilitation.

by Theodore Dalrymple



If the most recent terrorist attack in London had been an episode in a novel by a social satirist, it would have been dismissed as too crude or absurd to be plausible. Nothing like it could ever take place in reality.

Last week, Usman Khan attended a conference at Fishmongers' Hall, a grand location in Central London, marking the fifth anniversary of a rehabilitative program for prisoners called Learning Together, run by Cambridge University's Institute of Criminology. Suddenly, Khan, wielding a knife and wearing an imitation suicide-bomber's vest, went on a rampage, killing a graduate of the Institute who helped run the conference and a volunteer worker at the event, also a Cambridge graduate, as well as injuring three people. If Khan had not been stopped on

London Bridge by others attending the conference—including a convicted murderer on day-release from prison, nearing the end of his sentence for having strangled and cut the throat of a mentally handicapped young woman, apparently for the fun or pleasure of it—he would have killed others.

In 2012, Khan, along with eight others, was convicted for plotting to blow up the London Stock Exchange, kill Boris Johnson, the then-mayor of London, and plant bombs in synagogues, among other places; he had also planned to set up a military training camp for terrorists on his ancestral lands in Kashmir. His 2019 attack was evidently no flash in the pan or rush of blood to the head. After all, he was a disciple and close friend of Anjem Choudary, the extremist preacher and founder of the now-proscribed Islamist terrorist group, al-Muhajiroun.

Initially, Khan was given an indeterminate sentence, a form of punishment introduced by Tony Blair's government, which meant that he could be released only if the Parole Board thought that he no longer posed a threat to the public. This type of sentence was struck down on appeal—not on the correct grounds that it violated the rule of law, amounting to arbitrary preventive detention, but because it was feared that it would lead to the prisoner being detained longer than necessary. A judge replaced Khan's indeterminate sentence with a 16-year prison term, though in practice this meant only eight years in prison, since the Blair government had passed a law mandating the release of prisoners on license after they had served only half their terms. Khan was released from prison in 2018, but without any input from the Parole Board.

Not surprisingly, there has been a public outcry, though as usual in Britain it has focused, with almost infallible aim, on the wrong question: Why was Khan let out so early, without any assessment of his dangerousness, and inadequately supervised once released? For to paraphrase John Keats slightly:

*in the very temple of Rehabilitation  
Veil'd Terrorism had her sovran shrine.*

The public discussion in Britain in the wake of Khan's terrorist attack reveals three superstitions that, thanks to the activities of criminologists, sociologists, psychologists, and others, are now deeply ingrained in the public mind.

The first superstition is that terrorists are ill and are both in need of and susceptible to "rehabilitation," as if there existed some kind of moral physiotherapy that would strengthen their moral fiber, or a psychological vaccine that would immunize them against terrorist inclinations. The second is that, once terrorists have undergone these technical processes or treatments, it can be known for certain that the treatments have worked, and that some means exist to assess whether the terrorists still harbor violent desires and intentions. The third is that there exists a way of monitoring terrorists after their release that will prevent them from carrying out attacks, should they somehow slip through the net.

All three superstitions are false, though they have provided much lucrative employment for the tertiary-educated and have contributed greatly to Britain's deterioration from a comparatively well-ordered society to a society with one of the West's highest rates of serious crime. Their broad public acceptance is evident in the remarks of Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who, after the attack, said that terrorists should undergo rehabilitation rather than serve full prison sentences. Meanwhile, the father of the slain young criminologist said that he would not want his son's death to be "used as a pretext for more draconian sentences."

Decadence can go little further. I recall a passage from Chesterton's essay, "The Suicide of Thought":

*The modern world is not evil; in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues . . .*

*The vices are indeed let loose, and they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and the virtues do more terrible damage. The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone.*

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