"Maajid Nawaz recalls the experiences that led him to a radical islamist organisation Hizb ut- Tahrir"

'I watched a man stabbed in a London street – and felt nothing'

Most people find it hard to imagine stabbing another human being, let alone almost decapitating someone with a meat cleaver. To do so in broad daylight and in the middle of the road, while asking passers-by to take pictures, simply beggars belief. Few can understand how the British jihadists Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale could be filled with such hate. I'm ashamed to say I can. For I was similar to them once.

I spent 13 years inside Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), the global Islamist organisation that first spawned al-Muhajiroun, the banned Islamist terrorist organisation founded by Omar Bakri Mohammed and Anjem Choudary. Bakri and Choudary both knew Adebolajo, a 28-year-old who was raised as a Christian. Like Adebolajo, I was raised in Essex in an educated, middle-class and well integrated family.

Again, like Adebolajo, I went on to further education, although he dropped out while I gained a law and Arabic degree from The School of African and Oriental Studies and a Masters in political theory from the London School of Economics. (The belief that all radicalised young Muslims must lack jobs or are socially awkward loners is a dangerous misconception. I did not lack career opportunities, nor did I lack friends or girlfriends.) And I, too, was caught up in the aftermath of a Jihadist street murder in which a man was killed with a machete. It was 1995 and I was president of the Student Union at Newham College in East Ham. The union was nothing but a front for HT. We syphoned off money to our cause, giving lectures and preaching anywhere and everywhere – the street, the yard, the canteen where I would stand on the tables and spout hate.

We were encouraged by Omar Bakri to operate like street gangs and we did, prowling London, fighting Indian Sikhs in the west and African Christians in the east. We intimidated Muslim women until they wore the hijab and we thought we were invincible. And when an acquaintance of mine, Saeed Nur, slashed a Nigerian student, Ayotunde Obanubi, shouting the same battle cry as the Woolwich attackers, 'Allahu Akbar' – God is Great – I watched him die and felt nothing. I did not incite the murder but I did nothing to stop it.

So how did it reach that point? And what turns a tiny minority of ordinary, young, Muslim men into fanatical, cold-blooded killers?

For my own part, once I became a teenager I experienced severe and violent racism. The neo-Nazi para-military group Combat 18 began to target me and my friends. On a few occasions I was forced to watch as white friends were stabbed merely for being associated with me.

At 15, I was falsely arrested at gunpoint for playing with a plastic gun. This was the early 1990s, genocide was unfolding in Bosnia, while the international community failed to act. Add this to my own internal identity crisis – I didn't know if I was British or Pakistani, Muslim or agnostic – and my disenfranchisement from mainstream society was complete.

However, it's what happened next that sealed my fate. I needed someone who could guide a broken and confused 16-year-old. Instead, I came across a charismatic recruiter espousing HT's cause who sold me the ideology of Islamism in the name of Islam.

But Islamism is not Islam. Islamism is the politicisation of Islam, the desire to impose a version of this ancient faith over society. To achieve this, Islamism uses political grievances, such as mine, to alienate and then provide an alternative sense of belonging to vulnerable young Muslims.Preying on the grievances of disaffected young men is the bedrock of Islamism.

Like all bigoted ideologies, it plays on the identity politics game, creating a 'them and us', in order to provide a home for the 'us' against the alien 'other' and control the community by acting as the sole 'representative' of Muslims.

One of the Woolwich Jihaidsts ranted to onlookers, 'you' have occupied 'our' lands. Spreading this sense of exclusive Muslim victimhood is crucial to the radicalisation process. I continued to spread hate for many years after Obanubi's murder, co-founding branches in Denmark and Pakistan where we targeted army officers in order to incite military coups.

I was aiming to do the same thing in Egypt in 2001, when I was arrested and tortured. Eventually I was convicted of 'membership of a banned organisation' and sentenced to serve five years in Mazra Tora prison where deposed dictator Hosni Mubarak is now held.

It was then I began to sift through my layers of hatred and ignorance. I also encountered the kindness of strangers, especially Amnesty International whose campaign to win my release was led by an octogenarian in England I'd never met. After much soul searching I was able to renounce my past Islamist ideology, challenging everything I was once prepared to die for.

De-radicalisation begins by breaking down the logic which once seemed unassailable and rethinking what you are fighting for and why. That is hard to do when Islamists and Islamophobes feed off each other's hateful cliches.

We must not blame the security services for what happened. As long as a man can pick up a knife, these murders will be impossible to predict. The only way to try and prevent it happening again is to give those angry young Muslims another outlet. I have founded Khudi, in Pakistan, a youth movement which tries to counter extremist ideology through healthy discussion and debate.

I believe we need a similar grassroots movement in Britain. The only way we can challenge Islamism is to engage with one another. We need to make it as abhorrent as racism has become today. Only then will we stem the tide of angry young Muslims who turn to hate. Only then will they stop listening to people like Omar Bakri Mohammed and Anjem Choudary.

Maajid Nawaz is author of Radical: My Journey from Islamist Extremism to A Democratic Awakening.

This article was originally published by the 'The Daily Mail on 25th May 2013.