



'Those who cure you will kill you'



Canon Andrew White, who runs Baghdad's only Anglican parish, said that a leader of al-Qaeda told him it was going to destroy Britons and Americans

► Iraq al-Qaeda leader made threat in April

► British cleric passed 'Devil's' warning to FCO

Deborah Haynes Baghdad
Michael Evans, Adam Fresco

An al-Qaeda leader in Iraq boasted before last week's failed bombings in London and Glasgow that his group was planning to attack British targets and that "those who cure you will kill you", *The Times* has learnt.

The warning was delivered to Canon Andrew White, a senior Brit-

ish cleric working in Baghdad, and could be highly significant as the eight Muslims arrested in the wake of the failed plot are all members of the medical profession.

Canon White told *The Times* that he had passed the general warning, but not the specific words, to a senior official at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in mid-April. A Foreign Office spokesman said last night that it was forwarding the actual words to the Metropolitan Police.

The Times also learnt yesterday that one of the suspects, the Iraqi doctor Bilal Abdulla, had links to radical Islamic groups, and that several of the eight suspects have now

been linked to known extremist radicals listed on MI5's data base. Canon White, who runs Baghdad's only Anglican parish, said that he met the al-Qaeda leader on the fringes of a meeting about religious reconciliation held in Amman, the Jordanian capital.

"He talked to me about how they were going to destroy British and Americans. He told me that the plans were already made and they would soon be destroying the British. He said the people who cure you would kill you."

The man, who was in his forties and had travelled from Syria for the meeting, said that the plans would come to fruition in the next few

weeks and target the British first. He said that the British and Americans were being targeted because of their actions in Iraq. He did not learn the man's identity until after the meeting, and will not disclose it now, but said: "I met the Devil that day."

Separately, intelligence sources told *The Times* that Bilal Abdulla, 27, the Iraqi doctor involved in the Jeep attack last Saturday on Glasgow airport, had links to radical Islamic groups and was plotting a terrorist attack. They said that Dr Abdulla had met Mohammed

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Weekend votes plan to halt falling turnout

Voting in general elections may be switched to weekends as Gordon Brown seeks to reverse falling turnout and reconnect politics with modern Britain. Saturday and Sunday voting was part of proposals for constitutional change put forward by the Prime Minister yesterday. *News*, pages 2, 22, 23

More BBC repeats

The BBC will have to increase repeat programming because of a below-inflation licence-fee deal, the corporation's bosses said. There will be more *Life on Mars* and *Planet Earth* and less *Only Fools and Horses*. *News*, page 4

World's richest man

A Mexican telecoms tycoon has toppled Bill Gates, the Microsoft co-founder, as the world's richest man after amassing a \$67.8 billion fortune. Carlos Slim Helú, a 67-year-old turnaround specialist, is calculated to be worth \$8.6 billion more than Mr Gates. *Business*, page 36

Hostage drama

Hundreds of Hamas fighters have thrown a tight cordon around the area of Gaza City where the BBC journalist Alan Johnston is being held in an attempt to force the Army of Islam to relinquish its hostage. *World news*, page 29

Prices to rise

Fresh British-grown vegetables will be in short supply this summer and shoppers can expect hefty price increases as the topsy-turvy weather leaves crops damaged. *News*, page 19

After the must-have Galaxy dress, what next for Roland Mouret?

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Tesco sells 38 types of milk

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Tesco healthy eating skimmed
Tesco pasteurised semi-skimmed
Tesco whole
Cravendale semi-skimmed
Cravendale skimmed
Cravendale whole
St Ivel Advance semi-skimmed
St Ivel Advance whole
Tesco pure fresh skimmed
Tesco pure fresh semi-skimmed
Tesco pure fresh whole
Wiseman the one
T localchoice south east semi
T localchoice south east skim
T localchoice south east whole
Alpro light unsweetened soya
Alpro soya fresh
Alpro soya milk chocolate
Flora Pro.Active
Lactofree semi-skimmed
So good soya drink
St Helen's pasteurised goats'
St Helen's semi skimmed goats'
T Chocolate flavoured goats'
T semi-skimmed milk with omega-3
Tesco finest Channel Island
Tesco fresh sweetened soya
Tesco semi-skimmed goats'
Kids banana flavoured self-service
Kids chocolate flavoured self-service
Kids strawberry flavoured self-service
Nesquik chocolate
Tesco banana flavoured
Tesco chocolate flavoured
Tesco finest Belgian chocolate
Tesco finest mochalatte
Tesco strawberry flavoured

Is too much choice making us miserable?



Spoilt for choice

Ever had a panic attack in the jam aisle at Tesco? You're not alone.

LIZ HOLLIS explains why having too many options is bad for us, and how quick decisions can make us happier

For the naturally indecisive, Hell is choosing what to put in your supermarket trolley. Successfully negotiate the 38 choices of milk that I counted for sale in my local Tesco (organic, skimmed, soya, omega-3 enriched or filtered for purity) and you're then confronted with jam overload: 154 flavours. Selecting from the banks of rosehip jam hand-crafted in the Pyrenees, fig conserve, Scandinavian blackcurrant with "bits" or without, could take you all day. Then there's the aisle with 107 varieties of pasta and 98 types of fruit cordial...

Choice aplenty — indeed, so much that psychologists now believe that it is making us miserable. Most big supermarkets provide us with about 30,000 products, and each year they add more. Indeed, for a taste of what the future might look like in every store, visit the latest temple of runaway choice — the giant new American Whole Foods Market in Kensington High Street, West London. Here, choice rules supreme. You can choose from 1,000 wine labels, 100 types of nuts, oats and grains and more than 40 varieties of sausage.

"I feel as though I've been punched in the face after I've been round somewhere like Morrisons," says Joy Miller, 39, who runs a communications business in Norwich. "It's so overwhelming that it just makes you feel awful. If you carefully considered every aspect — ethics, food miles, price, flavour and ingredients — you'd never get round to buying anything, ever."

Of course, it doesn't stop at groceries. Everywhere you turn there is a mind-boggling parade of clothes, gadgets, financial products, holidays and entertainment. Tantalised by all these buying options, we stockpile our shopping baskets, homes and lives with ever more consumer goods that we probably don't need or even appreciate. And this isn't good for our happiness.

"The huge number of choices that assault



MARTIN ARGLES/EYEVINE

us every day makes many of us feel inadequate and in some cases even clinically depressed," says Professor Barry Schwartz, a psychologist from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and the author of *The Paradox of Choice*. "There is vastly too much choice in the modern world and we are paying an enormous price for it. It makes us feel helpless, mentally paralysed and profoundly dissatisfied."

Professor Schwartz believes that the dogma of all Western societies — that maximising freedom and choice increases welfare — is deeply flawed. "It wouldn't surprise me if eventually you'll be able to buy a mobile phone with integral nasal-hair trimmer and crème brûlée torch," he speculates sardonically.

So why does having so much choice make us feel miserable? Shouldn't we be delighted that we can travel to any corner of the planet for our holidays, or select from tens of thousands of financial plans? Sadly not. Because making a decision is now a nightmare. We can easily end up with what psychologists call "consumer vertigo", that is, swamped with so many options that we can't make any decision, or decide wrongly.

"So much choice makes decision-making increasingly complex," says David Shanks, a psychology professor and the co-author of *Straight Choices*, a new book that examines how to make the best decisions when faced with a perplexing array of options. We feel bad that every time we do make a choice, it seems we are missing out on other opportunities. This makes us feel inadequate and dissatisfied with what we have chosen. Often, we feel bamboozled and just shove a familiar or prominently displayed brand into our basket. Then we feel useless because we can't cook gourmet dinners like Jamie Oliver and don't know what to do with any of these exotic new ingredients. So we end up buying and eating the same meals time and again.

This excess also numbs us to the heady pleasure felt by previous generations when

they bought something new in an era when budgets were leaner and consumer goods in shorter supply. All we can think about now is what we still want to buy, rather than appreciating what we have.

Children are not immune, either. How can choosing yet another throwaway plastic trinket from the zoo gift shop ever equal the intensity felt by the 1940s child unwrapping just a couple of presents a year — on their birthday and at Christmas?

Experiments confirm that the less choice

We stockpile our homes and lives with ever more goods that we don't need. And this isn't good for our happiness

we have, the better we feel. Professor Mark Lepper and his team at Stanford University in America found that consumers who tested six jams went on to buy more and feel happier than those offered 24 jams to taste. Another experiment showed that giving students a choice of fewer essay topics made them produce better work.

"This suggests that we thrive when we have less choice," says Professor Lepper. "Excess choice is paralysis rather than liberation."

Yet the number of consumer choices available continues to multiply. "It doesn't help that there is an ever-decreasing amount of expert advice available from shop assistants — if you can find one at all," says Paco Underhill, chief executive of Envirosell, a research and consulting company. Consequently, many people's homes are filled with high-tech products that offer still more unwanted choices: washing machines with a host of setting options (though we only ever use two); phones that could send e-mails if only we knew how to use them.

How to make the big decisions

We are generally happier if we make quick decisions in mundane areas of life, such as selecting items of food or furniture. Save decision-making techniques, such as these below, for times when your choice really matters.

Adopt an outside view: Be objective. Look at what others did in the same situation and what happened as a result.

Consider the opposite: Think of reasons why your initial judgment might be wrong — over-optimism is a common reason for bad decisions. This keeps you within realistic limits.

Use the Five Whys: This is good for deeper analysis. Ask why, answer the question, then ask why again, at least five more times. For example: why do I want a new job? Because this one doesn't pay enough. Why? Because I haven't had a pay

rise. Why? Because I don't like to ask for one, etc. So assertiveness training might actually be a better option than looking for a new job.

Rank the options: Decision-making experts use a complex technique called MAU (multi-attribute utility). Do something similar by listing all the pros, then the cons. Rank each one out of ten for importance. Add up the scores to see where your priorities are.

Use ready-made decision tools: Use web-based price-checkers and expert recommendations such as those provided by *Which?* Realise your limitations and use the experts.

Adapted from *Straight Choices: The Psychology of Decision Making* by Benjamin Newell, David Lagnado and David Shanks, Psychology Press, £29.95



Choosing the right jam can take all day

But if all this choice is actually harming us, what can we do about it?

Professor Lepper suggests that, for a start, we should lighten up when selecting, say, a type of bread or a disposable camera. "Don't take making mundane choices too seriously or it gets to feel like an onerous task," he says.

Opt for small shops that offer less choice — it's harder to feel angst-ridden in a smaller supermarket where the choice is simply between big potatoes and small potatoes. In addition, decide on priorities before you look at what's available — for instance, you could look only at cameras that offer a large playback screen, if that's crucial for you. And don't expect to become

an expert; ask others who know what to look for.

To preserve mental wellbeing, save your decision-making effort for serious things that merit a large expenditure of time and effort. Then you can make better use of techniques such as those outlined by Professor Shanks and his colleagues (see box, left).

"Choose when to choose," says Professor Schwartz. "Don't worry about what type of mobile-phone package to opt for. Pick a sofa from IKEA in 30 seconds and you'll feel better than if you spend hours researching sofas — because you won't know what else you're missing out on."

He adds that when it comes to achieving

happiness it is better to be a "satisficer" who accepts a good-enough choice than a "maximiser" who always wants to make the best possible decision.

Perhaps we should all learn to love the constraints on our lives. After all, being restricted to a local job because you can't move your children out of school, or having to buy a house near elderly relatives, makes you (and them) feel better.

"It challenges a lot of our beliefs, but it could just be that choice within constraints will make us feel a lot better," says Professor Schwartz. "We need to live in the moment, appreciate what we have and not think about all the other things that we could choose instead."

An array of jams and, far left, various colours of tomatoes on the vine dazzle shoppers at Whole Foods Market in Kensington, West London

Where less choice is more

Apple

Apple has figured out that if you offer a small selection of iPods in just a few colours it boosts the feel-good factor and people buy. Their flagship stores have a minimal amount of products on display and lots of clear space. Other MP3 players may have more functions, but we still keep buying iPods in their millions.

Ladress.com

This website sells just one dress. Customers can vary the fabric, colour, skirt and sleeve lengths, but the essential article stays the same.

Amazon

Millions of titles to choose from but you don't have to wade through them. Amazon helps you choose with precision targeting and recommends similar titles to those you bought already. Choice is controlled rather than overwhelming.

Google

A massive advertising portal offering millions of buying suggestions but also one of the simplest. Its front page is clean with manageable options. Compare the front page of Yahoo! or MSN.



Where more is too much

Whole Foods

This giant new organic grocery store in Kensington High Street, West London, is the ultimate temple to the tyranny of choice.

There's so much to choose from in this upmarket, bulging store that you can even grind your own nut butter or make your own muesli — as if you didn't have enough to do already.

Primark

So much choice that it could send you crazy. This discount clothing store is bursting at the seams with stock, so if you like the simple life it is best avoided.

B&Q

Such a bewildering array of products to choose from that you can easily feel overwhelmed and buy a set of garden chairs when you went in only for a packet of nails.