

Can we avoid

war with Islam?

Paul Dobb and Geoffrey Barker

The frequency and savagery of Islamist terrorist attacks raises the inevitable question of whether Islam itself is sliding into a war with the West. Each successive attack seems to raise the bar of obscenity: the mass murder of office workers in the United States and train commuters in Madrid, the slaughter of Russian schoolchildren, videos of the decapitation of hostages in Iraq. What is next? A chemical or biological assault on a city or its water supply? Or is it more likely to be a nuclear bomb?

The fact that these questions must even be contemplated is a reflection of the seriousness of the situation in which we find ourselves. The extreme Islamist terrorists know no bounds in the horrors they want to visit on the West. We hope such concerns will prove unwarranted; we fear equally that they may not be.

Certainly, there is no refuge from conventional or even nuclear terrorism in Australia. The recent federal government White Paper on terrorism contains repeated warnings about these possibilities and declares: 'The acquisition of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons by transnational terrorist groups would add a new dimension to the terrorist threat to Australia'.

No less alarming in our view is the propensity of Australian politicians and voters to ignore the reality of this threat. If the recent federal election campaign demonstrated anything, it showed that Australian politicians and voters are still overwhelmingly provincial and materialistic and more concerned with short-term personal utility maximisation than with long-term national survival when it comes to political campaigning.

We must be careful, of course, not to label all adherents of Islam with the smear of terrorism. But moderate Muslims the world over must root out the terrorists in their midst and not passively acquiesce in what is being done in their name. The alternative is a bloody slide into a new religious war, the likes of which the world has not seen since the carnage wrought in the Thirty Years War between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the 1600s, which resulted

in the deaths of at least a third of the inhabitants of northern Europe.

There is nothing new about terrorism in world history. We will do well to remember the anarchist terrorists who assassinated seven heads of state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and that it was a Serbian terrorist who assassinated Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 and precipitated World War I. Late last century, Europe experienced waves of terrorism in the United Kingdom (the IRA), Germany (the Baader-Meinhof gang), France (Algerian terrorists), Spain (Basque terrorists) and Italy (the Red Brigades). Elsewhere, we have had Palestinian terrorists and the Japanese Red Army. But none of them were on the scale of the terrorism that we are now experiencing. Previous terrorist organisations generally had a territorial focus and a set of political demands that could at least be negotiated.

But the extreme Islamist terrorists that we face are not interested in negotiation or in settlement of territorial disputes. Their aim is no less than the destruction of the West and the creation of an Islamic caliphate centred on the Middle East and to include South East Asia. The all-out war that extreme Islamist elements are waging on the West knows no limits of civilised behaviour: there are no rules of war here and no concept of international justice. There is nothing that al-Qa'eda would like to do more than explode a nuclear bomb in downtown Manhattan. Can you imagine what the American response would be? The attacks of 11 September 2001, brought about the destruction of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the occupation of Iraq by the United States. In our view, a nuclear attack on America would provoke terrible retribution.

We can take it for granted that the US is thinking hard about how to control illicit access to weapons-grade nuclear material from countries such as Russia, North Korea, Iran and Pakistan. Forensic technologies are apparently available that would enable Washington to determine the source of weapons-grade fissile material used in a nuclear explosion.

What we are likely to see is a new American declaratory policy that threatens a nuclear response on any country providing fissile material in this way to a terrorist group that successfully explodes a nuclear weapon in the US. Robert Gallucci, a former US assistant secretary of state experienced in nuclear-proliferation negotiations with countries such as Iran and North Korea, describes this form of preventive diplomacy as 'extended deterrence'. Gallucci's concern is that sufficient fissile material is known to be missing in the world to construct three crude nuclear weapons with yields similar to those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is not beyond the ability of determined terrorists to detonate such devices in American cities, or even in the cities of allies such as the United Kingdom and Australia.

What this does not address, of course, is how the US will respond to terrorists who perpetrate a nuclear explosion in a major American city. The pressure to respond in kind will be enormous. Of course, logic dictates that finding an incontrovertible terrorist target will be enormously difficult. But the US will have to respond to this sort of nuclear degradation. The risk will be that the obvious targets will be in the Arab Middle East, in Iran or Pakistan. And then the West may be at war with Islam.

It needs to be plainly understood that if terrorists break the taboo of the past 60 years on using nuclear weapons, all bets are off. Major powers such as the US (or Britain or France) cannot stand idly by while they suffer the terrible consequences, including long-term radiation effects, of a nuclear explosion in one of their cities.

What has brought us to this remove? It is simply not good enough to assert, as some do, that it is all to do with the wickedness of America, the exploitation of Muslim countries by the West for oil, or that terrorism springs only from poverty and oppression. Some argue that Washington's lack of even-handedness in the Palestinian dispute with Israel has caused great resentment among Muslims worldwide. We agree with that sentiment. The former Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, also acknowledged as much in an address to regional defence ministers in June 2004.

But we need to face squarely the fact that the attacks of terrorism perpetrated since 11 September 2001, have all been done in the name of Islam. And the ideological centre of extreme Islamist terror has its wellsprings in the Middle East. It is from there that polluted interpretations of the Koran have spread to our very doorstep in Indonesia. Bernard Lewis, professor at Princeton University and an eminent authority on Middle Eastern history, asks: 'What Went Wrong?'. You do not have to accept every detail of his analysis to understand that the world of Islam, which for many centuries was at the forefront of human achievement, has failed dismally in its competition with the so-called Christian West.

Most apparent of all is what David Landes of Harvard University calls 'Muslim loss of civilisation leadership and

retreat from modernity', which is now at the centre of contemporary international affairs. Why, it also has to be asked, have so many countries in the Middle East failed where those of East Asia have succeeded? Less than half a century ago, most countries in our region were poverty-stricken and backward and many had dictatorial regimes. Now, Asia's success compares cruelly with the continuing failure of the Islamic Middle East. Lewis argues that, compared with its millennial rival, Christendom, the world of Islam has become poor, weak and ignorant. He states that by all the standards that matter in the modern world: economic development and job creation, literacy and educational and scientific achievement, political freedom and respect for human rights what was once a mighty civilisation has indeed fallen low.

Two years ago, the British academic James Piscatori asked the question whether we regard Osama bin Laden as the final cry of a whimpering revolution or as a disconcertingly representative voice for the future. The answer must be decisively the latter, although it remains to be seen whether increasing attacks of barbarism in the name of Islam are destined to backfire and isolate the radicals. For the latter to occur, Muslims everywhere will have to recognise that there is a problem that cannot just be attributed to the faults of the West. For example, Jemaah Islamiyah has yet to be legally banned in Indonesia and no senior Islamic figure in that country has condemned the terrorist network by name. Shahram Akbarzadeh, a senior lecturer at Monash University, observes:

Rejecting other Muslims as evil to a Western audience is probably the hardest challenge Australian Muslims have faced.

But, as he notes, voices of public condemnation have been hardly audible.

So, herein lies the nub of the problem. While it is obvious that all Muslims are not terrorists, it is sadly apparent that these days all terrorists happen to be Muslims, as *The Economist* has remarked. If we are to avoid a disastrous and full-blown war between Islam and the West, each side will have to make some radical changes. Muslims everywhere will have to raise their voices against Islamist fanatics. And they will have to stop blaming their predicament on the West for everything. Otherwise, as *The Economist* again argues, their faith will be hijacked and turned into a cult-like vehicle for a clash of civilisations.

In Australia, with its sizeable and visible Islamic population, these issues have potentially grave ramifications in the aftermath of the Bali attack. Osama bin Laden and other terrorist spokesmen have warned that Australia is a target, and there is no reason not to believe them. One Australian Muslim, Jack Roche, is already in jail for helping to prepare terrorist acts in Australia. Other senior terrorist leaders and suspected terrorists, including the French suspect Willy Brigitte, have been in Australia. In his report on Australian intelligence agencies, Philip Flood notes: 'Before the Bali bombings, Australia's

foreign intelligence agencies underestimated in some important ways the nature of radical Islam in South East Asia and the extent to which regional extremists posed a threat to Australia.'

The government's White Paper on terrorism says bluntly that 'the terrorist threat to our nation has never been higher'. It notes that modern terrorists are technically skilled, intelligent and educated and that 'the range of weapons at the terrorists' disposal is wide and increasing'. It says: 'Transnational terrorist groups have ready access to information on chemical, biological or radiological materials and, to some extent, nuclear weapons via publicly available information, including on the internet'. If terrorists obtained such weapons, there is little doubt they will use them against Western targets.

As for us in the West, we need to recognise that Israel's record in the West Bank is not pretty, nor is Russia's in Chechnya, nor for that matter America's actions in Iraq not to mention Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prison. It is a dismal thought that, having avoided nuclear holocaust in the Cold War, we are standing on the precipice of entering a global conflict that in a different way may involve the use of nuclear weapons. This must not end up becoming a war between Islamist fanatics and Christian fundamentalists because if it does, a dark future awaits the world. ♦

Paul Dibb is Emeritus Professor in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra. Geoffrey Barker is the defence and national security columnist for 'The Australian Financial Review'.

2005 Essay competition

To help celebrate *Defender's* 22nd year of continuous publication, HarperCollins Australia have generously donated three copies of Paul Ham's new book *Kokoda* (reviewed on pp. 35-7) to be prizes for the journal's writing competition in 2005. A copy of *Kokoda* will be awarded to the ADA member or *Defender* subscriber who personally writes the best essay-type article published in each issue of *Defender*.

Such essays need to discuss a major issue affecting the formulation of Australian national security policy, defence strategy, or a major capability issue affecting the ADF. The essays need to be between 1200 and 1500 words unless prior permission for a longer piece is obtained from the editor. Submission must be received by the 15th of the month in February, May, August and November respectively.

The awarding of the prize will be judged by the journal's editorial board and their decision is final. ♦

Christmas greetings

The board of directors of the Australia Defence Association and the editorial board of *Defender* hope that all our members, readers and other supporters enjoy a happy Christmas and a safe and healthy New Year. At this time we also especially hope all Australians remember those defence-force personnel deployed overseas, often in dangerous places and situations, on our behalf. ♦

Conference Calendar

ADA members and other *Defender* readers may be interested in the following public conferences and activities:

UK Massed Bands from the Edinburgh Military Tattoo

Australia Day Tribute

7PM 26 January 2005, Australian War Memorial Parade Ground, Canberra

Enquiries: (02) 6243-4211

Edinburgh Military Tattoo in Australia 2005

A Salute to Australia

3-5 and 7-8 February 2005, Aussie Stadium, Moore Park, Sydney

Enquiries: www.edinburghtattooinaustralia.com/

Chief of Air Force Conference 2005

The Shape of Things to Come

14 March 2005, Melbourne Exhibition and Conference Centre

Enquiries: (02) 6266-1355 or www.airforce2005.com.au/conference.htm

Australian International Airshow 2005

15-20 March 2005, Avalon Airport, Melbourne

Enquiries: (03) 5282-0502 or www.airshow.net.au

Department of Defence (Strategy Group) Joint Future Warfighting Conference 2005

Preparing for Tomorrow's Threat Today

20-21 April 2005, National Convention Centre, Canberra

Enquiries: (0412) 472-766 or www.defence.gov.au/strategy/fwc/default.htm