

# Understanding the challenge

## of Islamist terrorism in order to counter it

Dennis Richardson

The challenge of transnational Islamist terrorism is a global problem but this article concentrates on the threat to Australia. The term 'al Qa'eda' is used as a loose descriptor to cover both the organisation itself, as well as other groups acting independently and without central direction, but which share al Qa'eda's ideology and are inspired by the likes of Usama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al Zawahiri.

### Iraq and terrorism

Amongst the insurgents in Iraq there are former Saddam Hussein loyalists, other Iraqis with a range of motivations and non-Iraqis, including militant Islamists, of whom al Zarqawi is the most prominent. It is easy to get so caught up in the debate about Iraq that you overlook the fact that al Qa'eda's intent and purpose was marked out long before Iraq and long before '9/11', as witnessed by bin Laden's fatwa in February 1998 in which he declared innocent civilians to be legitimate targets. In respect of al Qa'eda and Iraq, a UN-sponsored and peaceful resolution to Iraq in late 2002 or early 2003 would have been irrelevant to al Qa'eda's intent and purpose.

All the terrorist attacks outside Iraq during and since the war, and committed by al Qa'eda or groups sharing its ideology, would have occurred with or without the war. This includes the 11 March 2004 train bombings in Madrid and the attack on the Australian Embassy in Jakarta on 9 September 2004. To the extent Iraq may have been a motivator, when you strip it down, it has been an add-on, not the central driver.

The terrorist leader in Iraq, al Zarqawi, fought in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He was imprisoned for terrorism offences in Jordan in 1994–99, had his own training camp in Afghanistan in 1999–2001 and moved between South Asia and the Middle East during 1999–2003. Al Zarqawi shares bin Laden's ideology and it would be naive in the extreme to assume that, but for Iraq, al Zarqawi would be at peace with the world. For him, Iraq is a convenient killing field. If not Iraq, it would be elsewhere.

In making these observations I am not suggesting that there have not been any downsides to Iraq:

- Iraq has provided al Qa'eda with propaganda and recruitment opportunities and it only stands to reason that they would have some success;
- it has provided another self-justification or rationalisation for acts of terrorism; and
- it has increased the threat of terrorism against Australian interests in the Middle East, as the Prime Minister noted in answer to a question in Parliament on 24 March 2003.

So far, Iraq has not had a significant impact on the security environment here in Australia and there has been no change to the overall threat level domestically. For the relatively small number of people in Australia who share bin Laden's ideology, for instance, Iraq is just one more focus. It is possible that some new followers in Australia have been motivated primarily by Iraq, and we cannot exclude the possibility of Iraq being a motivator for some people here in Australia who may want to do harm. Iraq was not a motivator, however, for Willy Brigitte, the Frenchman who was in Australia last year to carry out a terrorist attack.

Internationally, Iraq has not so far become the *cause célèbre* that Afghanistan became for many young Muslims worldwide in the 1980s. The number of non-Iraqis fighting coalition forces is not known but is estimated to be around 2–3000, with most from other Middle Eastern countries. Some have come from further afield, including from Western Europe and South Asia, and we would need to be concerned if those numbers became significant. We should not be surprised if the odd one turns up from Australia.

Iraq is, however, well short of the global 'honeypot' that was Afghanistan. It has, not yet at least, fired the passions of South East Asian militant Islamists. That could of course change but we need to be careful in assuming Iraq is a re-run of Afghanistan.

To what extent those who have gone to fight in Iraq were already committed militant Islamists or to what extent fighting in Iraq has or will turn others, including some Iraqis, into committed militant Islamists, is not known. The only reasonable assumption is that Iraq has added to the number

of militant Islamists and will lead to the further development of international linkages between such individuals and groups. This is something we will need to measure over time.

In the context of global Islamist terrorism, the real potential downside of the conflict in Iraq would be if the US-led coalition lost its resolve and drifted away. Such a development would embolden militant Islamists globally and could lead to the establishment, in parts of Iraq, of Afghanistan-type safehavens for terrorists in which training and other rebuilding could occur unhindered. I note this without making judgement about the Iraq war per se. At this stage, however, we have more to lose if the US-led coalition gives up than if it stays with the appropriate commitment and resourcing.

## A global challenge

The situation in Iraq also raises the question of where Australia's counter-terrorism efforts should be focused. Every country has finite resources and, consistent with the national interest, choices must be made about their allocation and deployment.

In the context of the current terrorist challenge, it is essential that we make these choices within a global perspective and do not put an artificial intellectual fence around Australia itself or a particular region. It is not a zero-sum equation with anything done beyond South East Asia being, by definition, at the expense of what can be done within the region.

Clearly we must be, and are, closely engaged in and with the region. Other things being equal it should and does come first. It is that part of the world in which we can make a substantial counter-terrorism contribution, consistent with our national interests.

The two terrorist attacks against Australia so far have been in Indonesia and our interests remain under high threat in the region generally. We have a visibility and a profile in South East Asia beyond what we have elsewhere. Furthermore, Jemaah Islamiyah was certainly developing a presence in Australia and, but for the lead information provided by the Singapore authorities in late 2001, this might have gone undetected for some time.

We also need to understand clearly that Australia is a global target. Our interests are at high threat elsewhere, especially in South Asia and in the Middle East. While Australia is not the target of first choice, there have been credible threats against our interests beyond South East Asia and our interests could be attacked anywhere.

Since '9/11' the Australia Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) has sought to identify Australians worldwide connected to terrorism. That work has taken us from Indonesia to inside the Arctic Circle and to all continents but Antarctica. It is work which continues to this day.

As an example, Willy Brigitte was born in the Caribbean, introduced to militant Islam in France, trained as a terrorist in Pakistan, and was sent to

Australia to carry out a terrorist attack. If it was not for the co-operative work of the French authorities, ASIO, the AFP and the NSW Police, he may have succeeded.

Overwhelmingly, those people resident in Australia who have undertaken terrorist training have done so beyond South East Asia. Furthermore, their motivations and continuing links come from beyond the immediate region. Of the Australians who have so far been convicted of terrorism offences or who are facing terrorism charges only one, Jack Roche, has a connection to South East Asia. Roche, the first Australian recently convicted of terrorism offences, is a British migrant trained in Afghanistan by al Qa'eda and connected to Jemaah Islamiyah.

Of the four Australians awaiting trial in Sydney for terrorism offences, two are Australians of Pakistani origin, one is an Australian of Lebanese origin and one was born in Australia of Lebanese background.

One Australian was recently released from custody in Lebanon after serving a short sentence for terrorism offences and a further Australian is awaiting trial in Lebanon on terrorism offences. One Australian from China is in custody in Kazakhstan after being convicted of a terrorism offence in 2001. Two other Australian citizens are in Guantanamo Bay awaiting trial before a United States Military Commission. One of these detainees was born in Australia of Caucasian parents and the other is of Egyptian origin.

So while South East Asia needs to be our priority, this should be within a global perspective and in a framework which recognises the terrorist linkages and threats beyond the region. This framework should also be sufficiently flexible to accommodate involvement beyond South East Asia in recognition of the fact that, when it comes to terrorism, Australia's national interests can be engaged almost anywhere.

Certainly, ASIO could not properly fulfil its legislative and operational responsibilities if we saw our job primarily limited to Australia and South East Asia. On the contrary, we must go where our responsibilities take us.

## Australia and terrorism

The debate about Australia's involvement in Iraq has also, at times, clouded the issue of when Australia became an al Qa'eda target and for what reason.

Before the attacks in New York and Washington DC on 11 September 2001, ASIO had already identified a small number of Australians who had trained in Afghanistan and others with some connection to al Qa'eda. ASIO's 1999-2000 Annual Report to Parliament—the public version of our classified report to Government (which is also provided to the Leader of the Opposition)—noted that:

'there are militant groups internationally which view terrorism as a legitimate means of pursuing their cause. Some are sufficiently well-resourced to view the whole world as their theatre of operations. Some have a small number of supporters in Australia'.

The Report also referred to 'the threat of terrorist activity by associates of Usama bin Laden and other groups'.

Before the attacks of 11 September 2001 ASIO's broad assessment was that:

- despite bin Laden's threats against the United States and 'its allies', there were no indicators that Australia was a priority target, either here at home or against our interests abroad; and
- any attack within Australia would most likely be directed against United States and/or Israeli interests.

Following 11 September 2001, ASIO raised formal threat levels in Australia, and raised to High the classification of the threat to Australian interests in Indonesia. In particular, we considered it significant that bin Laden's statement of 3 November 2001 explicitly mentioned Australia as a target for the first time.

The extent to which Australia was considered a target well before '9/11', however, only became evident subsequently. In late 2001 Singapore uncovered the plot by Jemaah Islamiyah to attack mainly US interests there, but also including an attack on the Australian High Commission. The JI investigation in Australia led to Jack Roche and to the aborted plot to attack Israeli diplomatic interests here in 2000. A raid in Pakistan in late 2002 uncovered details of the casing (before the '9/11' attacks) of a number of airports worldwide including one in Australia. This does not mean that there was an actual plan to attack an Australian airport, but it does indicate that consideration of an attack here was within al Qa'eda's strategic vision.

During 2002 we were able to establish that al Qa'eda's chief operational planner, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, had obtained a tourist visa to visit Australia in August 2001. The visa, which was applied for by Khalid using a then unknown alias, had not been utilised and was cancelled. The only reasonable assumption is that Khalid was planning to come to Australia for some operational purpose. From the debriefing of captured senior al Qa'eda figures in 2002 and 2003 we know that attacks in Australia, over and above the ones I have already mentioned, were actively canvassed well before '9/11'. Finally, in the context of the extent to which Australia was and is considered a target, we had actual attacks against us in Bali in October 2002 and in Jakarta in September 2004.

The obvious question is why are we a target? One possibility is simply to take at face value what terrorists like bin Laden and al Zawahiri say. They claim we are a target because of our alliance with the United States, and because of our involvement in East Timor in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001–02 and Iraq since early 2003.

We should take seriously any statement by al Qa'eda leaders declaring particular countries to be targets. However, their claims as to why are puzzling—except if you interpret their declarations as being directed not at their avowed enemies but at their followers or potential followers.

In this context, bin Laden's first known reference to East Timor in November 2001 was designed to strike a chord in South East Asia, especially Indonesia, and his subsequent references to Afghanistan and Iraq must be

seen in terms of wider al Qa'eda propaganda and recruitment purposes. This is not to diminish the significance of his references to East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq, but to question whether our involvement in those countries is the central driver in al Qa'eda's targeting of Australia. Otherwise, how do you explain al Qa'eda's very real interest in Australia, and the targeting of us, before our involvement in the countries cited. It simply does not make sense.

Perhaps then, we are a target because of our longstanding and close alliance with the United States. As I have noted previously, the fact that we are in close alliance with the United States does contribute to us being a target—but this is very different to any claim that we are a target solely because of our alliance with the United States. Furthermore, even if we were a target only because of our alliance with the United States, on what basis would any self-respecting country allow terrorists to determine such central policies—in this case one which has had bi-partisan and popular support for over 50 years?

In addition, as the governments and peoples of Kenya and Indonesia know, you do not need to be in alliance with the United States for your citizens to be murdered by the likes of al Qa'eda and Jemaah Islamiyah.

If East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq and our alliance with the United States are, to varying degrees, only contributors or add-ons, what is it then that lies at the centre of those who provide the intellectual and strategic drive which leads to us being a target?

The answer to this question lies in the world view of Islamist terrorist leaders such as Usama bin Laden, al Zawahiri, al Zarqawi and Abu Bakar Bashir. This is a world view shaped and driven by a militant, extreme and literal interpretation of the Koran. It is a world view which seeks to hijack one of the world's great religions and is a world view which predates the Afghanistan of the 1980s. This world view reaches back to the teachings and ideologies of Sayyid Qutb, a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1950s and early 1960s, and which reaches back many centuries before that.

This Islamist world view, in which we and others are seen as part of a Jewish–Christian conspiracy, is a world view in which the United Nations and its Secretary-General are declared enemies and legitimate targets, and a world view in which Muslim countries ruled by other than Taliban-style governments are declared enemies and supposedly legitimate targets.

Finally, it is a world view so removed from our own values, traditions and experiences that it is tempting to dismiss it as empty, meaningless rhetoric and so unreal as not to be taken seriously. It is so much easier to explain the challenge in terms of other supposed root causes such as poverty, or in terms of our own failures. Such explanations have a familiar shape and give us something concrete to address within a somewhat comforting framework. Such an approach gives us a sense of some control, a sense that, if only we can get our side of it right, it will go away.

It is, of course, so much more confronting to be challenged by leaders who have such a totally different frame of reference and who are playing a different game on a different playing field.

I appreciate that my perspective is but one view and that some scholars and terrorist experts would disagree. I also acknowledge that the resolution of issues, such as Palestine, would deny al Qa'eda some significant oxygen. Resolution of the Palestine–Israel dispute is an important goal—provided we do not fall into the trap of seeing al Qa'eda merely as an outgrowth of the Palestinian issue.

Nor am I seeking to pretend that our involvement, in Afghanistan for instance, is irrelevant. As noted by the then Australian Attorney-General, Daryl Williams, in the House of Representatives on 17 September 2001: 'we must be acutely aware that our own active involvement in the fight (against terrorism) could well bring terrorism closer to our own shores'.

In my view we have no alternative but to continue to meet the challenge of al Qa'eda and groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah; their world view allows for no compromise or

conciliation. People such as Abu Bakar Bashir are terrorists masquerading as good Muslims. As Bashir's interview with the *Bulletin* of 21 September 2004 shows, they seek to hide their hatred in the language of the pious.

In summary:

- Iraq is not the starting point for Islamist terrorism;
- the Islamist terrorist connections into Australia are global, the challenge is global and our regional counter-terrorism priorities should continue to be managed within a global context; and
- the world view at the centre of al Qa'eda and groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah best explains why we are a target and is the key to understanding why the challenge will be with us for a long time. ♦

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#### **Letters cont'd (from p. 4)**

ONA later recruited Wilkie as a civilian seemingly because he fitted in with the gentleman amateur culture of the agency, perhaps because so many diplomats and academics without real intelligence experience have been self-selected to work there.

ONA claims to be the country's paramount intelligence agency. Yet neither selection process appears to have taken account of Wilkie's pronounced lack of intelligence experience, qualifications or aptitude. Hopefully the appropriate institutional and professional lessons have been drawn rather than the whole sad saga being blamed just on Andrew Wilkie's personal weaknesses and professional shortcomings.

**John Rogers  
Victoria**

Sir: I thoroughly enjoy reading the ADA's commentary, so well synthesised, in your regular *Defence Brief*. It is infrequently that I find myself disagreeing with the Association's synopsis of events. This, however, is one such occasion.

In commencing your pre-election comparison of defence policies you noted that this would be restricted to the Coalition and Labor. Your rationale for the exclusion of the Greens and Democrats was the absence of any 'serious chance of forming a government' and an absence of 'serious Defence policy'. This is a potentially dangerous perspective and approach, and one I am sure, that various Greens and Democrats supporters would applaud heartily.

Both the Greens and Democrats have defence and national security policies. It is variously illuminating, amusing and horrifying to wander at your leisure through their respective websites. Are they sensible? No—they

are a collection of nonsense underwritten by an apparent overarching complete absence of commonsense or reflection on real-world realities. Indeed, it is perhaps unfair to arbitrarily collate the two together. At least the Greens appear to have put some effort into their task, crazy though most of their solutions appear. The Democrats have not even done that. Their 'policies' are restricted to a few specifics only. Both parties, however, are to be commended for their motherhood statements in support of ADF veterans.

But are they serious? Well, from a perspective informed by Mr Brown's discussion of the need to free up access to (currently) illegal drugs, I suspect they are serious about what they outline. The danger in your exclusionary approach is that the influence of both parties, but especially the Greens, could eventually be significant if they ever hold the balance of power in the Senate. Just what could be the ultimate quid pro quo of Labor's preference deals with the Greens? Is it possible that aspects of national security could be sacrificed at the feet of a combination of domestic political expediency and utopian faith in human nature?

Only by exposing the inaccuracies, unrealities and stupidities of these off-the-wall pseudo-defence policies will the electorate see these fringe parties in their broadest and truest sense. They are not just 'tree huggers' or bastard honesty testers, but parties with broader social and political agendas including defence and national security policies that are positively dangerous.

Analysis of party defence policies for future elections should include the minor parties. All parties should be invited to detail their defence and national security-related policies so comprehensive comparisons can be published.

**Mitchell Thomas  
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