

# The international context

## of Islamist terrorism

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This article draws on ONA's work on terrorism but is not an official ONA assessment. Its focus is on the nature of Islamist terrorism: what drives it, what are its objectives, and how it is changing and adapting to the global efforts to turn it back. There is much about the nature of Islamist terrorism that is not fully understood, particularly the fundamental question of the 'transmission belt' from religious belief to terrorism.

There may be some who would further complicate things by objecting to the very term *Islamist* (or jihadi) terrorism. The term *Islamist* is used here merely as shorthand to describe the global threat we currently face from groups and individuals who present their cause in Islamist jihadi terms. The use of the broader term *Islamist terrorism* in no way suggests that there is anything intrinsic in the Islamic religion which justifies or even lends itself to terrorism.

At the outset, we can base discussion on a few broad propositions.

First, the threat from Islamist terrorism is growing and spreading to more countries.

Second, the greatest terrorist threat now comes from a large, diverse and fluid network of Islamist groups and individuals more often inspired by Al Qa'eda than directed by it.

Third, this threat will likely be with us for at least a decade and possibly a generation.

### Who are the terrorists and what do they want?

There is no single profile that fits every Islamist terrorist. Usama bin Laden is the millionaire son of a construction magnate. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's deputy, is a medical doctor. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the now dead leader of Al Qa'eda in Iraq, was an uneducated street thug who converted to a radical form of Islam in prison. Recently we saw a female Belgian convert to Islam become a suicide bomber in Iraq. It is difficult to identify what such people have in common other than a willingness to kill — and sometimes to die — for a cause they are convinced is right as a matter of religious belief.

No study has so far been able to explain why some people become terrorists in the name of any ideology and others do not. Socio-psychological factors and questions of identity

seem to be important and the dynamics of various cults have some striking parallels to terrorist cells. One thing we frequently see in the trajectory of terrorists is a conversion experience that occurs within a small, tight-knit group. The dynamics of such groups tend to reinforce personal conviction, especially among individuals whose other social networks have frayed or cannot match the intensity of the bonds forged in what is for them an existential struggle.

In Islamist circles the group is often led by a charismatic figure such as a jihad veteran, or jihad entrepreneur who raises funds and recruits for jihad. Such groups are found in many contexts, from prisons to social clubs. Often they are associated with a mosque, but generally they do not hold meetings in the mosque itself. Also the internet is playing a role in such conversions by exposing people to extremist views and the possibilities presented by jihad — something to which I will return.

Many of the members of such cells have little history of extremism — or of religious piety. The most pious are not necessarily those most likely to become terrorists. Indeed, one could argue that for some people it is their poor understanding of Islam — and for the young suicide bomber, perhaps even their naivety — that has made them susceptible to extreme views.

Some analysts have argued that the root causes of terrorism lie not with the psychology or life experience of the individual but with deeper underlying political and economic currents. These root causes are variously listed as poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, the demography of youth bulges, Palestinian dispossession and so forth. These so-called 'root causes' are relevant but they do not, in my view, go to the heart of the issue.

First, there is the obvious fact that many terrorists are middle class or even from elite backgrounds. Social studies of terrorists show that they are generally better educated than the broader population. Second, terrorism is not limited to developing countries as the history of terrorism in developed democracies such as Spain and the UK clearly shows. Finally, behind talk of root causes there is an assumption that they are somehow more real than the terrorists' self-proclaimed motivations, and that economic factors are more solid than ideology or identity. As the protests over the Danish cartoons showed, however, issues of belief, identity and culture are just as real as material ones for many Muslims, and may well drive the emotions of many even more strongly.

That said, dysfunctional economies and authoritarian political systems magnify feelings of frustration and anger which, in turn, provide fertile soil for those who manipulate questions of identity and victimhood in the cause of violent jihad.

## The transformed threat

Since 9/11 the nature of the terrorist threat has changed. It has become more decentralised and amorphous. Al Qaeda is still an active threat even if it has not been directly responsible for any major attack for the past two years. Al Qaeda is fighting a war that it believes will last for generations. It has not given up its goal of conducting catastrophic attacks in the United States. We should not forget that eight and a half years passed between the first and second World Trade Centre attacks, and that the relative failure of the first attack seems to have acted more as an incentive than discouragement.

One of Al Qaeda's achievements has been to draw many groups and jihadists out of their local struggles and focus them on the far enemy. Zawahiri, now Al Qaeda's chief ideologist, himself moved from a local, Egyptian preoccupation to a global, anti-US ideology. The story of Jamaah Islamiyah in Indonesia is about the transformation of a group which grew out of a national Islamist movement — Darul Islam — and has gone on to adopt the global jihadist view of Al Qaeda and others.

The terrorist threat today is best understood as a network of networks. Sometimes the groups and cells that make up this extended network are held together by formal alliances — the best example is the alliance between core Al Qaeda and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Al Qaeda franchise in Iraq. Most often the links are informal, based on personal contacts. Furthermore, Al Qaeda does not exercise command and control over this extensive network in a conventional sense.

Consequently Islamist terrorists co-operate with each other at a variety of levels. This co-operation may not be 'official', and it is certainly not part of a giant global plot directed from a cave somewhere on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ad hoc cells are formed for particular operations. A terrorist 'entrepreneur' with good access to financial donors can supply money. Cells or individual facilitators can provide others with documents or at least with the knowledge of where they can acquire them. A more experienced group can provide a trained bomb-maker to a cell that has a plan but not the technical expertise to carry it out. Veterans can vouch for new recruits to get them into training camps.

This amorphous structure can make it extremely difficult to determine who was responsible for an attack and how it was carried out. After a major attack such as Madrid or London, the automatic question is was Al Qaeda responsible? This all depends on what you mean by *Al Qaeda* and by *responsible*. Certainly Al Qaeda's ideology and its record of attacks may have provided inspiration, but beyond that the direct fingerprints are harder to find. Because of the nature of this network-of-networks, it is always possible to find intriguing

personal links back to core Al Qaeda figures — but such links do not necessarily mean direct command and control. More importantly no direct Al Qaeda involvement — for either planning or finances or other help — is needed to carry out successful attacks.

Partly as a result of this network-of-networks structure we should be careful not to ascribe to Islamist terrorism a monolithic unity. There are connecting threads including the conviction that the US and its allies are waging a war against Islam, the contempt for supposedly 'apostate' Muslim regimes, a rejection of liberal democracy as atheistic and decadent, and particularly, the appeal of the single narrative of Muslim victimhood.

But it is also the case that the jihadist movement is diverse with a large degree of internal disagreement over goals and methods. Nor are terrorist groups exempt from the squabbles over money, personalities, and thwarted ambitions that afflict all organisations. One example of disagreement is the current debate between Al Qaeda leaders such as Zawahiri on the one hand and Zarqawi's network in Iraq on the other over the legitimacy of killing Shia Muslims. Various groups have varying opinions on the legitimacy of killing any civilians. There is also the persistent debate over whether to fight the near enemy — the allegedly corrupt and apostate regimes of the Middle East or Indonesia — or the far enemy, the United States which allegedly keeps those regimes in power.

We should not however latch onto such disputes as evidence terrorist groups are about to implode. The jihadist tent is a broad one. Whatever their differences, most Islamist terrorists see themselves as fighting for the same cause: God is one, His cause is one, so His army is one.

## Counter-terrorism successes

The contention that Islamist terrorism will be with us for some time yet is not intended to suggest that the fight against it is failing. A better way to look at it would be to say that while we have had some big wins it is perhaps premature to declare victory.

Many terrorist leaders and planners have been killed or captured around the world. Crucial middlemen have been arrested, such as Hambali who was a link between Al Qaeda and Jamaah Islamiyah, and skilled planners such as Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, the so-called mastermind of the 9/11 attack.

The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan ended the Taliban-sponsored territorial sanctuary enjoyed by Al Qaeda and other groups and shut down the extensive training camps and support networks they were able to maintain there. Without such sanctuaries Al Qaeda's core leadership has been driven underground. Multilateral conventions have made the transfer of terrorist funds more difficult. Terrorists have been forced to limit their use of electronic communication and fall back upon couriers. Improved border security and more secure travel documentation have made travel more difficult. We have seen unprecedented co-operation at the bilateral and multilateral level among security forces and intelligence agencies. As a result plots have been disrupted and many terrorists have been captured.

## Iraq

These global efforts underline the global nature of the threat. Those waging the jihad certainly see it as a global struggle as events in Iraq demonstrate. There, jihadists see an environment rich in both targets and propaganda opportunities. Iraq is being used as a rhetorical rallying point by jihadist groups around the world. Jihadists see in Iraq an opportunity to directly attack the far enemy, the United States. Their target is also what they regard as the near enemy: the democratically elected government of Iraq which they portray as an American puppet. In Iraq, as elsewhere, jihadists have also been quite adept at exploiting communal and regional tensions.

Videos of attacks on Coalition forces appear on the internet within hours and we know that such material is manipulated in the radicalisation and recruitment process. Propagandists use the war to reinforce their narrative of Muslim victimhood, of the clash of civilisations and of cosmic war between Islam and the supposedly crusading West. Furthermore, terrorist networks and cells have formed to supply recruits, funds, and the everyday equipment of the bomber to the jihad in Iraq. These facilitation networks extend throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Western Europe.

It would however be a mistake to see the insurgency in Iraq as essentially a jihadi campaign. Foreign jihadists are responsible for a disproportionate number of the suicide bombings targeted at coalition and Iraqi forces. But the foreign jihadists comprise only a small fraction of the overall insurgency, which is more about Iraqi Sunni resentment at the loss of power than jihad against the west. Moreover, the global threat from Islamist terrorism would exist irrespective of what has happened in Iraq.

Nor is Iraq in the same league as pre-9/11 Afghanistan as a base for global Islamist terrorism. So far terrorist groups have not been able to establish training camps in Iraq on the scale of Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. Most insurgents in Iraq are also locals, and many will not want to extend their jihad outside of Iraq.

There is a concern about the potential for a terrorist bleedout from Iraq — the Amman hotel bombings, for example, were planned in Iraq and carried out primarily by Iraqis under the direction of Zarqawi's network. Zarqawi, having been imprisoned in Jordan, has a particular grudge against that country. A key point here, however, is that the scale and nature of the jihadists groups in Iraq are quite different to what we faced in Afghanistan.

## Terrorism and the internet

This loss of territorial sanctuaries has magnified the importance of the internet for the terrorists. Just like everybody else in our digital age, Islamist terrorists use the internet for many purposes. They use it to communicate and transfer funds, although counter-terrorism efforts have had some effect in restricting both. They use it to raise funds — videotapes of attacks in places like Iraq and elsewhere are used to encourage further donations. But probably the most important use of the internet for Islamist terrorists is the creation of a virtual 'ummah', or community of believers.

Islamists are at the forefront of those recognising the net's full potential to promote a virtual community. There are literally thousands of websites with chat rooms and bulletin boards where extremists can contact like-minded people.

While such people are a small minority of the general population, the internet allows them to form a community of their own, reinforcing and radicalising their views. It also provides a forum in which the merely curious, or disgruntled, can be exposed to extremist views. While governments around the world can shut down extremist mosques, or deport radical imams, or even use new technology to increase their control of the internet, it is impossible to shut down the internet or deport firebrands to a place where they cannot access the internet and continue to preach in cyberspace.

While the internet is important to the tactics of terrorism its role should not be exaggerated. Documents and videos posted on the internet can certainly be used for training but despite the massive amounts of information on the internet, this augments, not replaces, real-world training in camps. The information on the internet is most useful to someone who has already received terrorist training. For example, the mere fact that there are recipes, of varying degrees of completeness, for chemical and biological weapons on the internet does not mean terrorists are successfully producing them.

Nor has Islamist cyber-terrorism been a major problem so far. Whatever their wishes, Islamist terrorists currently have low capability to attack the internet itself or the infrastructure it supports. There are many states and criminal groups that have a greater capacity.

## Southeast Asia

For Australia the trajectory of terrorism in Southeast Asia is of particular concern and in many ways developments in this region mirror those globally. Considerable progress has been made in counter-terrorism efforts. The political will to deal with terrorism is stronger today than in the aftermath of the first Bali bombings in October 2002. Better co-operation is occurring among security forces and intelligence agencies. Capacity-building programmes by Australia and others are bearing fruit.

Key leaders have been arrested or killed, including the arrest of Hambali, the main link between Jemaah Islamiyah and Al Qa'eda and a key player in the first Bali attack. Last year Azahari — also closely involved in the Bali-1 bombings — was killed. Around 300 Jemaah Islamiyah members have been arrested in Indonesia overall. Nevertheless, Jemaah Islamiyah remains a capable and resilient terrorist group. It retains links with Al Qa'eda but is not dependent on Al Qa'eda for either funding or operational support. Under pressure it has become more decentralised in its structure and operational planning, but its strategic objectives and its targeting of Australia and the West are unchanged.

Jemaah Islamiyah has continued to carry out attacks, most recently the second Bali bombing which targeted Westerners including Australians, but actually killed many more Indonesians. Jemaah Islamiyah can draw on a pool of trained bomb makers and a larger pool of sympathisers who can provide logistical support for a core of operational planners.

This situation will not change soon, despite the general abhorrence of the overwhelming majority of Indonesians towards Jemaah Islamiyah's methods and goals.

There are several other issues to which we must play close attention in Southeast Asia. One of the key elements of Al Qa'eda's method has been to globalise what are essentially local disputes and portray what are nationalist or ethnic conflicts as being part of a more important, and strategic global jihad. So we need to be alert to whether Al Qa'eda or Jemaah Islamiyah are succeeding in injecting themselves into the separatist conflicts in the southern Philippines and southern Thailand.

In the Philippines this is already the case with Jemaah Islamiyah's links into the southern Philippines giving it a longer strategic reach. In return for safe havens and a certain strategic depth, Jemaah Islamiyah has provided groups in the south with terrorist training. This relationship has extended the capabilities of all participating groups.

In contrast we have seen little evidence so far that Jemaah Islamiyah or Al Qa'eda has managed to inject itself into the separatist conflict in southern Thailand, although the longer the conflict continues, the greater opportunity there will be for outside groups to interfere.

## Longer-term outlook

The war against terrorism is a misleading metaphor because it suggests there will be a decisive moment when we know whether we face victory or defeat. The reality is that this will be a long and incremental struggle waged on many fronts. Part of the struggle will involve finding and eliminating Islamist terrorists and constraining their support bases. But at a broader level it will also involve blunting the appeal of violent extremism by giving potential recruits a greater sense of hope than the nihilism which lies at the core of terrorist psychology.

It is in this area that economic and political factors intersect with the drivers of terrorism. Open societies delivering on the economic aspirations of their citizens are not a guarantee against terrorism but they will go a long way towards blunting the appeal of extremists. Democracies are more likely to be responsive to the grievances that can lead people to adopt violence. They are more likely to implement the economic reforms which will not only increase the size of the pie but share it more equitably. In the long run democracy can break the political and economic hold of narrow elites, allow the kind of civil society that permits free expression, and reduce the corruption that plagues authoritarian societies.

But democratisation cannot be an immediate panacea. First, groups like Al Qa'eda are not going to lay down their arms and participate in a democratic process. For men like Zawahiri and Zarqawi, democracy puts human law ahead of what they see as God's law and is therefore abhorrent. They hate Islamist groups that participate in the democratic process as much as they hate the Middle East's current regimes. Terrorists would probably still target those governments — even with such Islamist groups in power — just as they target the democratically elected government in Iraq. Since new democracies would probably be supported by the West, then the West too will remain a target.

Second, democratisation can, in the short term, increase strategic uncertainty. Due to the lack of secular or liberal political parties in the Middle East, it is probable that Islamist parties of some stripe would win many free elections. We simply do not know what a group like the Muslim Brotherhood would be like in power. The recent success of Hamas in the Palestinian elections illustrates these points. Certainly one can argue that the responsibility of governing should be a moderating influence in the long term. But whether this turns out to be the case in the short to medium term in the Middle East is by no means certain.

Third, radicals can exploit political space in democracies, especially newly emerging ones; space which authoritarian regimes would deny them. A militant Islamist fringe is now present in post-Suharto and democratic Indonesia; a fringe which seeks to intimidate mainstream Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and parts of which is feeding recruits to Jemaah Islamiyah. Few Indonesians agree with their ideology, and even fewer with their methods, but enough at least sympathise with the Islamists' narrative of Muslim victimhood and Western conspiracy to make counter-terrorism co-operation with Western countries politically sensitive.

Islamist terrorism will remain a challenge to the authority of many governments and a disruption to the fabric of trust and openness that globalised economies need for at least the next decade. Regardless of how democratic and well-governed Islamic-majority countries may become, calls by religious fundamentalists for a return to a 'pure' form of Islam have recurred throughout history and are unlikely to disappear. There will always be extremists — including some in democratic Western societies — who see in Islam a powerful vehicle to express a range of political and social views. Whenever and wherever this impetus cannot be channelled into peaceful political or religious forms, there will be at least some level of Islamist terrorism. ♦

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