

**PERSPECTIVES**

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**LIQUID TERROR: THE DYNAMICS OF  
HOMEGROWN RADICALISATION**

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## **Liquid Terror: the dynamics of homegrown radicalisation**

**Waleed Aly**

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If there is anything constant in the shape of the terror threat facing countries like Australia, it is its rapid evolution. Particularly since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, global terrorism has been characterised by an ever-increasing disorder: it is increasingly decentralised, and unconventional. That is, as I shall come to explain, it is *liquid*.

Several illustrative examples from 2007 may be adduced, but perhaps the most evocative claimed no innocent lives at all: the failed terror plots in the UK in late June. Here were three failed attempts in two days, outside a London nightclub and at Glasgow Airport. The significance of these events is not that they failed but the manner in which they failed – principally as a function of the incompetence of those attempting to perpetrate them. In London, the car bombs’ firing mechanisms, to be triggered by mobile phone, comprehensively failed. One car was discovered when parked illegally, and taken to the Park Lane car pound. Only due to the hyper-vigilance of parking inspectors did the police come to be notified. The attack on Glasgow Airport, meanwhile, while at least achieving detonation, ended up killing no-one except the perpetrator himself.

It is fair to say these attacks did not go according to plan. This, obviously, is a significant relief. At a deeper level, though, the facts are disturbing. They indicate we are not now dealing with some kind of well drilled, structured organisation where people are recruited into a hierarchy and they are trained and given high-level skills that allow them to pull off spectacular acts of terrorism. More and more, terrorists are amateurs. They may be relatively incompetent, but they are also unlikely to be part of a network. Such people are not recruited – they recruit themselves.

This completely changes the dynamics of global terrorism because it immediately makes it less useful to think about the terror threat in the conventional terms we often employ: Who’s the leader of the group? Whom do we target so the structure of the network collapses and we

can claim a victory in the fight on terror. Indeed, through these conventional inquiries, we may measure the war on terror to be a success: many al-Qaeda operatives have been captured or killed. Yet that success is misleadingly ephemeral. The terror threat continues to grow. The number of thwarted attacks – and implicitly the number of would-be terrorists, has spiked since September 11, 2001. Why? What’s going on? Something is different about the way that terrorism is being configured now.

The renewed stream of video releases from Osama bin Laden in 2007 – his first since 2004 – are instructively symbolic in this connection. Bin Laden is now putting together quite an impressive cinematic portfolio, which is no accident. Now, however, he is not dressed in military fatigues. He’s dressed in the golden robes of a statesman. He has carefully cultivated a more youthful, vital appearance. He is not, and for a long time, has not been issuing strategic advice or instructions. He is not identifying targets. He is not addressing somebody he knows personally and with details of the next operation and how it will be conducted. In fact, there are relatively few examples of bin Laden doing that. His letter, published just prior to the Iraqi invasion where he explains his followers’ strategy for the upcoming war stands out in this respect, as it does for its eerily accurate description of the military and economic quagmire that would follow. More typically, though, bin Laden’s mode of discourse is a motivational one. He is a motivational speaker now. He provides a political narrative for people, a narrative of inspiration, but he issues no direct instructions. Indeed, this has become the standard role within global terrorism for its peak symbolic ideologues like bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.

In truth, bin Laden himself is now quite unimportant except as a symbolic figurehead. He sends messages into the chaotic systems of public intercourse, and simply waits for the effects. Accordingly, he uses the most profoundly modern devices that he can: video, global media, cyberspace. The result is a disconnected global terrorist movement – not an organisation – of the most chaotic character. Ayman al-Zawahiri can condemn the Pakistani President and then sit passively as, a few days later, headlines tell of an assassination attempt. Naturally, there is no evidence of a connection between Zawahiri and the attempted assassin. There doesn’t need to be. And that is precisely the point: terrorists scarcely need to recruit anymore because we have entered a phase of self-radicalisation, of DIY terrorism.

I call this Liquid Terror, relying on European sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of ‘liquid modernity’. That is this idea that our times are characterised by ever changing structures that they never quite reach equilibrium before they evolve. We never reach a solid state of modernity where things settle in their place and reach some kind of maturity. Things

move and evolve before they solidify, and accordingly we find ourselves proposing solutions to past problems, which have since evolved into something else. So we fret intensely about the harmful by-products of MySpace, even as the world has moved on to Facebook. It is a dynamic that discloses itself repeatedly in late-modernity, hence Bauman's proliferation of descriptive phrases: liquid life, liquid love, liquid fear, liquid times.

Even September 11, in some ways the act of a more ordered troupe, is a vivid example of the dangers of these chaotic currents. Here was a manifestly spectacular and devastating attack on the symbolic centres of the world's superpower, yet it could never have been perpetrated by a nation state. No nation could have penetrated the United States and attacked so crudely, but 19 individuals could; in a sense because they were more modern than the nation they were targeting. And so it has proven since: the nature of modernity is changing and the advantage modern systems like the global terrorism movement have is this ability to reconfigure themselves, to regenerate.

Today, the elimination of a key figure in a terrorist network, such as the United States has achieved quite frequently, is becoming almost inconsequential. The system simply regenerates. Another link creates itself, perhaps in cyberspace. Another person steps into a key role, someone hitherto unknown. Thus, organisations like al Qaeda in Iraq appear from nothing. In truth, it is not really al-Qaeda at all, but represents a quasi-independent franchise in the global terrorism movement. It exists because Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had managed to convince bin Laden and al-Zawahiri to accept his use of the al Qaeda brand. It's marketing. Which is why some analysts have ceased talking about al Qaeda, which is almost irrelevant now, and instead discuss *al-Qaedaism*. Here, al-Qaeda is merely an ideological symbol from which people pick and choose whatever motivation appeals to them via global media, via cyberspace, and still, though less importantly, via real life social networks.

Moreover, the necessary propaganda has no single source. It is not just that bin Laden has a production company that puts together and distributes cinematic trailers for political ideology. He doesn't need to because global media can do that for him. None of us heard of the Abu Ghraib scandal from Osama bin Laden. The photos of cowered Guantanamo Bay detainees that confront us regularly were not an al-Qaeda scoop, but were taken within the official machinery of the American state, probably for the purpose of demonstrating (and celebrating) the Bush administration's toughness on terrorism. Nevertheless, these markers are faithful servants of global terrorism. Released into the public domain, they find a life of their own, and interpreted in contexts wildly beyond those anticipated when the relevant photos were originally taken. Once projected onto the global screen, people all over the world access them

and they draw their own conclusions. No one is truly in control of this process. Certainly, bin Laden isn't. It's liquid. Its shape changes to fill the shape of its environment. It's adaptive. And this means that in thinking about how we might fight it, we must be prepared to critique the most conventional starting assumptions of what we call the 'war on terror'.

Governments are particularly bad at responding in this sort of environment because they are so thoroughly from the old world. Indeed this is evident in their speed in employing the word 'war' in this context. As it happens, this is deeply misleading because it encourages us to think in conventional terms: as though we are confronting a battle between two organisations, two armies, two entities that have solidified. Hence, the United States' immediate post-September 11 instinct was to invade other nation states – first Afghanistan, then Iraq. The latter in particular was an attempt to impose a conventional geo-political template onto an unconventional problem. Hence the Bush administration's determination to construct a myth that somehow connected Saddam Hussein to global terrorism. This was an attempt to squeeze the terror threat into the Westphalian frame with which governments are familiar, even if it is ill-fitting.

But global terrorism, as I have argued, is liquid – not conventionally solid. We are not dealing with organisational structures. We are most truly dealing with a persuasion around which otherwise disconnected people can coalesce accidentally into a movement. These are people that often have wildly divergent ideologies, and often disagree vehemently with one another. They are not some uniform factory product. This is not some singular evil ideology, despite the now familiar insistence of various pundits and politicians. It is a persuasion that has converged on an expression of political violence at a given point in time.

Identity politics is central to forging, and fighting, such a persuasion. It is crucial to grasp this because it leads us to think of counter-terrorism in new ways. Presently, the governmental focus is disproportionately on the pointy end of the terrorism process: finding people who are about to kill us and locking them up. And it is precisely because the more formative stages of this process are beyond the conventional gaze that the scope of the threat grows consistently. It is true that governments do grasp this at some level, which is why they often talk correctly about the need to win the 'battle of ideas', the 'battle for hearts and minds'. But it is a battle that the likes of bin Laden and al-Zawahiri understand extremely well.

How, then, are identities presently being formed among Muslims particularly living in the West? It is a question worth asking because it is crucial to understanding the dynamics

underpinning the phenomenon of home-grown radicalisation. In truth, a comprehensive answer would fill several full-length volumes, but within the confines of this format we can at least outline some basic dynamics.

Among Western diasporic Muslim communities, the more radicalised elements tend not to be migrants, but locally born Muslims, or converts to Islam. It is within these groups that significant numbers are finding attraction in non-traditional forms of religiosity. Indeed, traditional or classical forms of Islam and of Islamic thought are falling desperately by the wayside, a phenomenon that has its roots in the Muslim heartlands but is being felt quite keenly in western Muslim communities. To simplify, the history has much to do with the emasculation and even dismantling of many of the traditional centres of Islamic learning pursuant in the colonial period. As the colonial project venerated the physical sciences, the Muslim world's top intellectuals followed. 'Engineer' and 'Doctor' became not merely the professions adopted by the most talented, but titles denoting social status. The people who took up the mantle of religious scholarship were usually those of lesser intellect, looking to redeem respect. Naturally, classical Islamic thought fell into something of a hole as a result. With the arrival of the post-colonial era, a contest of ideas naturally emerged around what the future of these Muslim nations should be. Arab nationalism appropriating elements of socialism ultimately failed, paving the way for a nationalistic form of religion to assert itself as a means of reclaiming the political identity of these nations. But it is not classically trained Islamic theologians from the great classical institutions that lead this charge. This is, instead, the domain of political activists, who, because of their disproportionately scientific backgrounds, do not approach it with the subtleties of a theological perspective, but the certainties of ideology. And so they propose a more ideologised politicised form of religion. Here emerges a new kind of identity politics in the Muslim world. And it is this ideologised form of Islam, most commonly expressed non-violently, which finds its more extreme manifestations in terrorism. We should not be at all surprised, therefore, at the numbers of engineers (bin Laden) and doctors (al-Zawahiri) among terrorist groups. Such classes have long been the drivers of this ideological trend. This emerges precisely from the sociology of the colonial experience.

In the West, many Muslims who may have grown up with little devoutness can accurately be described as having a 'born again' religiosity. Their parents were often not devout, and instead, they discovered Islam in the zeal of their adolescence. Accordingly, they do so with the zeal of a convert, what one American Muslim writer has called 'convertitis'. It is a common social dynamic that seems to appear regularly when people embrace a new outlook. Here, some embrace ideologised, identity-driven forms of religion, usually because the

imperatives that drive them have more to do with a crisis of identity. For these people, Islam becomes as much an identity movement as it becomes a traditional faith. It becomes lived, not along traditional religious lines, but in ways that reinterpret key ideas such as salvation and the next life in a manner that is more narrowly focused on the here and now. Often that makes them more politicised.

Here, the social dynamics in which those identities are formed are crucially important. Where people perceive themselves to be in a social environment of hostility – usually buttressed by vitriolic samples on talk back radio, tabloid television and the more belligerent corners of the press – a reflexively hostile identity politics follows. Hence the phenomenon of identity Islam among Western Muslim communities, where Islam itself becomes transformed, where verses of the Qur'an are given newly politicised meanings unrecognisable to the classical exegetes. This is a sector whose religious imagination proceeds from its heightened political awareness, or perhaps more specifically, its sense of social and political alienation.

It is obvious in this environment that government policy has a direct impact, though perhaps not in the one-dimensional way that is often assumed. Countless commentators have drawn an immediate connection between foreign policy and radicalisation, the most obvious example being the claim that the London bombers were radicalised by Britain's role in Iraq. Certainly, there is an element of truth to this narrative that is even deeper than many appreciate. For example, the Iraqi invasion has registered the monumental achievement of unifying vastly divergent radical discourses because it has removed the need to demonstrate the legitimacy of a jihad against America: whereas previously America had to be constructed as the far enemy, now it is militarily present in a Middle Eastern war zone to be fought. This sudden rhetorical coherence has certainly made radical ideologies more compelling to a broader audience than it could previously have convinced.

But the oft-forgotten dimension of government policy in this context is domestic. The liquid nature of modernity means that the old distinctions we have maintained – geographical, national, and most relevantly, distinctions between foreign policy and domestic policy – are beginning to collapse. The murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, which is most accurately understood as a terrorist attack, is a case in point. The assassin, Mohammed Bouyeri, was clearly disillusioned with the Dutch political terrain, which he perceived to be vehemently anti-Muslim. Prior to the attack, for example, the Dutch government had adopted an aggressively assimilationist discourse towards Muslims, expressed finally in the deportation of some 26,000 people, some of whom had been living in The Netherlands for over five years. This sort of domestic policy greatly angered Bouyeri. In



fact, van Gogh was a substitute target. Bouyeri would have preferred to kill a Dutch politician he regarded as being anti-Muslim, but found this too difficult. His primary grievances were not against van Gogh's anti-Islamic film, *Submission*, but against the broader Dutch political environment. When finally Dutch troops were sent to Iraq, Bouyeri had a narrative of global persecution at his disposal that connected the suffering of Iraqi Muslims with his own sense of domestic alienation. Accordingly he saw himself as a soldier in a global war against Muslims, not a lone actor offended by a single film.

These circumstances are common. A person might begin with deep local grievances, but quickly learn to give them a global meaning. This is the nature of liquid modernity, where space collapses and it is possible to plug into the grievances of antipodean communities, even virtual communities, instantly. With globalised information flows, I can now appropriate the grievances of Muslims from Europe, Asia or the Middle East as my own, and I can therefore construct an artificially unified story. The brilliance of demagogues like bin Laden is in their ability to exploit this; to impart upon people the tools to knit together global narratives of persecution out of their domestic grievances; to convince disconnected audiences that the frustration, exclusion and alienation they feel domestically is not merely a domestic problem, but is precisely the same oppression visited upon their co-religionists in Iraq, Israel, Chechnya or Kashmir, part of the same grand design.

As the world becomes globalised, so too are identities and their accompanying narratives. Identities may now exist outside of space. This is why Bouyeri is not alone in considering himself a soldier in a global war. It is not because The Netherlands had declared war on his parents' homeland of Morocco, but because the world has declared war on his global collective, his de-territorialised community.

The implications for government policy are relatively clear. No longer can we maintain the convenient political fiction that it is possible to quarantine policy decisions, whether foreign or domestic, from issues such as the terror threat. It is clear that whatever actions we take, in whatever sphere we take them, can and do have an increasingly global resonance. They become internalised and interpreted by people who are watching the global screen. That raises profound challenges of policy, challenges governments are typically yet even to acknowledge, probably because they still conceive of terrorism as being something that may be fought conventionally, via networks and organisations, and as a war. But we do not truly confront a 'war' on terror. What we face is more accurately described as an argument. One that will be won or lost through action, and also through word.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Waleed Aly** is a lecturer in politics at Monash University and works at the Global Terrorism Research Centre. He was a board member of the Islamic Council of Victoria for over four years and comments frequently for the media on a range of issues relating to Islam and Western Muslims. In 2007, he was named one of *The Bulletin* magazine's 'Smart 100'. He is the author of the recently published *People Like Us: How arrogance is dividing Islam and the West*.

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