

The AtmosFEAR of terror: Australian Muslims as objects of fear and othering

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear. H.P Lovecraft

There are many ways of looking at fear: fear can be a rational response to the presence of a real danger or an irrational response to an imaginary danger; it can paralyse or it can motivate; it can serve a political purpose or it can serve a deep psychological need, it can be instinctive, inherent to our psychological makeup or it can be historically specific.

This paper explores different ways of looking at the fear of terrorism that are sometimes in tension with each other. When viewed from the perspective of political fear, fear of terrorism is typically characterised as the fear of an external threat and presumes a community with a shared identity and common political values and interests. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the human response to terrorism is a metaphor for the innate fear of death in humans. An examination of the fear of terrorism as political fear and as psychological fear reveals that the behavioural responses to these kinds of fear have found a similar expression in the Australian context- heightened levels of aggression and discrimination targeted at Muslim Australians identified as the objects of fear, concern and suspicion.

These kinds of behavioural responses contribute to yet another kind of fear, a kind of politically repressive fear that finds expression among members of Muslim communities in Australia who are vulnerable to the media and political discourse that identifies radical Islam and, by inference, Australian Muslims as the objects of fear. For Australian Muslims, the fear of terrorism presents itself as a very real and tangible threat- that of backlash, discrimination and religiously motivated violence from some sectors of the wider community.

The AtmosFEAR of terror

Following September 11, polls in the United States revealed a heightened level of fear and anxiety about the likelihood of further terrorist attacks. According to one poll, 52 percent of Americans said they could imagine themselves or a loved one as a victim of a terrorist attack (Kakutani, 2001). While this may be understandable given that the attacks occurred on American soil, Australian polls also indicated a heightened fear and anxiety about a possible terrorist attack in Australia. According to a poll published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in April 2004, 68 percent of Australians believed that Australia was at threat of an imminent terrorist attack (Michaelsen, 2005; Viscusi, 2003). In fact, risk assessment studies underline that the actual risk of a terrorist attack is marginal in comparison to many other mortality risks such as smoking and car accidents (Mueller, 2004; Viscusi, 2003), which begs the question, exactly what is it that Australians fear if indeed the actual threat of a terrorist attack is disproportionately lower than the perceived threat?

Since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, a new discourse of terrorism has emerged as a way of expressing how the world has changed and defining the way things are today (Altheide, 2004). Terrorism, it seems, has become the new metonym for our time where the 'war on terror' refers to a perpetual state of alertness as well as a range of strategic operations, border control policies, internal security measures and public awareness campaigns such as 'be alert, not alarmed' (Aly & Balnaves, 2005). The 'atmosfear' of terror has permeated the construction of the Western world as perpetually at threat of terrorism. The media and political construction of September 11 and the subsequent 'war on terror' is one in which the West is in a perpetual state of alert from a foreign, alien, politically defined 'other', where, as Brian Massumi (2005) states, "Insecurity...is the new normal" (p. 31).

The emerging discourse on terrorism frames the war on terror as a global battle between 'us' and 'them' and 'the West' and 'others', whereby the 'others' become the objects of fear, concern and suspicion. Framed in a rhetoric that portrays it as a battle for the Western values of democracy and freedom, the 'war on terror' becomes not just an event in space and time but a metonym for a new world order drawing on distinctions between 'us' and 'them' and 'the West' and 'others' and motivating collective identity based on a construction of 'us' as victims and 'them' as the objects of fear, concern and suspicion. Especially since September 11 (and to some extent before September 11- albeit less saliently), Muslim Australians have occupied the space of the 'other' in the popular media. Despite the assertions of politicians that the 'war on terror' is not a war against Islam, Muslims have become, by inference, identified as the objects of fear and suspicion.

Political Fear

Fear makes the wolf bigger than he is. German Proverb

In the film *The Island*, those in power control the masses through the memory of a shared event. This is the essence of political fear. It refers to the use of fear to maintain control over the populace by sustaining a persistent state of anxiety and tension. Typically political fear mobilises members of societies to re-affirm their collective allegiances in the face of the perceived threat.

What makes the fear of terrorism a kind of political fear? To begin with, the fear of terrorism hinges on the ability of state institutions, government and media, to induce and perpetuate fear of an identified threat. By engaging a range of counter terrorism strategies that are disproportionate to the actual risk of a terrorist attack, the government has defined terrorism as an object of fear that would direct public concern (Robin, 2004).

The London terrorist attacks in 2005 have prompted what is, arguably, a drastic response from the Australian Government, arguably because the attacks were perpetrated by second generation British youth of Pakistani origin signalling what the media then termed the threat of 'homegrown'

terrorism. In September 2005, the Western Australian Government announced what are, by its own admission, the toughest counter terrorism laws in Australia, granting police special powers to search, apprehend and detain people suspected of terrorist activities without a warrant. At the same time, the Commonwealth and other State/Territory Governments were considering a range of internal security measures and legislative amendments to address the threat of a terrorist attack in Australia including increased powers to the Australian Federal Police and creating a new offence for leaving baggage unattended within an airport precinct.

The kinds of political responses to the London bombings would once have seemed an unthinkable assault on civil liberties and unreasonably authoritarian. Yet in the 'war on terror', framed as a global battle between good and evil, policies and strategies that once seemed impossible suddenly become constructed as rational, if not prudent (Stern, 2004). In times of crisis the reasoned negotiation of risk is marginalised. In the case of the 'war on terror', the use of discourses of national security and sovereignty were central to intensifying the fear of terrorism and hence marginalising the reasoned negotiation of the risk and potential impact of a terrorist attack (Spence, 2005).

The second aspect that makes fear of terrorism a political fear, is that a central element of political fear is that it is often not read as such- rendering it alien to analysis, critical debate and understanding (Robin, 2004). It is this aspect of political fear that instils it with the capacity to unify collective allegiances against a politically identified object of fear. According to Robin "Convinced that we lack moral or political principles to bind us together, we savor the experience of being afraid, as many writers did after 9/11, for only fear, we believe, can turn us from isolated men and women into a united people" (p. 3).

The representation of the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks is testimony to how terrorism was constructed as a non-political phenomenon. The nineteen hijackers were constructed as angry young men. Their

grievances were exposed as symptomatic of their psychological and cultural circumstance. They were motivated by inner torments not politics. This is explicitly personified in the media construction of Mohamed Atta, the Egyptian- born ringleader of the September 11 attacks, as an embittered young man struggling with his own troubled relationship with his traditionalist father and confronted with the confusing world of modernity. Much attention was focussed on reports that Atta sat on his mother's lap well into adulthood and that his father often complained of his son's femininity (Robin, 2004, p. 6).

In emphasising the September 11 attacks as symptomatic of Islamic fundamentalism's deep seated anxiety of modernity, it was established that no political or diplomatic response could be deployed. The perpetrators of September 11 were not motivated by their understandings and experiences of the history of US global policies nor were their grievances in response to numerous US interventions in Muslim countries or its support for Israel. They targeted the United States for its values of liberty, democracy and freedom-values particularised in the political rhetoric and media discourse as exclusively and characteristically Western (Osuri, 2004). The rhetoric used in the 'war on terror' is characterised by the familiar invocation of terms like democracy and freedom to make distinctions between 'the West and the rest' and to legitimize references to civilized and uncivilized worlds. In his speech delivered at the United Nations Security Council Ministerial Session on Terrorism on January 20, 2003, Colin Powell invoked the rhetoric of a clash of civilisations and urged "We must rid the civilized world of this cancer.... We must rise to the challenge with actions that will ride the globe of terrorism and create a world in which all God's children can live without fear". US President George Bush, in his address to the joint houses of Congress shortly after September 11 stated "This is the world's fight. This is civilisation's fight" (cited in Brown, 2002, p.295).

It is this construction of the war on terror as a global battle between 'the West and the rest' that imbues the fear of terrorism with redemptive qualities, enabling and facilitating behavioural responses associated with a reaffirmation of identity and membership of a collective simultaneously denying

membership to the collective to those perceived to be “other”. This response has found expression in the perception of Muslims as an alien, culturally incompatible and threatening other, creating a state of social tension where the public’s anxiety has been and continues to be directed at Australian Muslims who visibly and visually represent the objects of the fear of terrorism.

Psychological Fear

By virtue of its nature, the analysis of fear of terrorism as political fear is to some extent narrow and exclusionary. Certainly, the argument here is not that terrorism should be seen as an apolitical phenomenon. However, the human response to acts of terrorism- namely fear and terror- need not only be viewed in terms of a political tool created and sustained by political leaders in the pursuit of certain political goals. This kind of analysis leaves no room for an exploration of the psychological factors that are implicated in how people respond to conflict (political or otherwise). The argument here is that the fear of terrorism can be understood through a combination of disciplinary approaches. In other words fear can be a political tool, and it can also be an emotional response to a real or perceived threat.

Terror Management Theory or TMT (Pyszczynski, Solomon and Greenberg, 2003), despite its name, has little to do with the managing the threat of terrorism. TMT does however offer an understanding of human behaviour in the face of terror and as such a way of understanding the popular response to September 11. At its core, TMT posits that humans have an innate awareness of their own mortality that gives rise to potentially overpowering feelings of terror and the need to maintain “psychological equanimity” in their lives (p. 16). This potential for terror is managed through the construction and maintenance of cultural worldviews that serve to reduce anxiety about the inevitability of death by providing a sense of meaning, stability, permanence and order. The very existence of culturally constructed beliefs that serve to maintain a sense of equanimity and immortality gives rise to feelings of anxiety and apprehension towards those who oppose these beliefs.

A core element of TMT is the mortality salience and worldview defence

paradigm (Pyszczynski, Solomon and Greenberg, 2003). TMT posits that national identity is central to people's worldviews and to explaining hostilities among different societies and nations. Thus, when confronted with their own mortality (mortality salience), people are motivated to protect their own world views and react positively to anything that upholds their cultural world views and negatively to anything perceived to threaten these world views. The range of behavioural responses to mortality salience include prejudice, aggression and the marginalisation of those considered to have different world views that do not conform to a particular cultural stereotype.

From the perspective of TMT, the global broadcasting of the terrorist attacks of September 11 presented audiences around the world with a constant barrage of images of death and destruction prompting an unprecedented level of mortality salience. The subsequent attacks in Bali, Madrid and London continued to remind audiences of their own mortality. Accordingly, the psychosocial response to global terrorism is a renewal of collective identity as people attempt to "restore the psychological equanimity disrupted by the potential or actual eruption into awareness of mortality..." (p. 96).

The distal, that is unconscious and delayed, responses to the broadcasting of the September 11 and subsequent terrorist attacks are an intensified quest for meaning and value, patriotism and nationalistic sentiment, suppression of dissent, intensified bigotry, stereotyping and prejudice. These reactions have found expression in the Australian context. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission reported in 2004 an increase in the reported incidences of racially and religiously motivated vilification and prejudice against Muslim and Arab Australians since September 11.

When viewed from a psychological aspect, in terms of a threat to people's ontological security, terror is transported from the realm of politics and into the realm of identity politics- and it is in this aspect that the human response to the fear of terror finds expression in the perception of Muslims as "other". Through fear, society can reaffirm its commitment to a set of common political values that are threatened by an identified enemy. At an individual or

group level, this reaffirmation may be expressed through a renewal of nationalist ideologies and patriotic behaviours. As Falk (2002) states, "...when a society is threatened by an external enemy there is a strong tendency to express patriotic feelings through tribal and ultra-nationalist displays of unconditional support" (p. 331). It is specifically these aspects of political fear that can be understood from a psychological perspective and that offer a way of understanding how media discourses that draw on nationalist ideologies can influence constructions of fear among Australian audiences.

Media discourses in the representation of September 11, the war on terror and subsequent terrorist attacks drew on concepts of national identity and an "international kinship of whiteness" to localise September 11 for Australian audiences (Osuri and Banerjee, 2003, p. 153). As shareholders in the Anglo Christian cultural world view, Australian audiences were also invited to participate in the distal responses to September 11- to renew their commitment to the values of democracy and freedom and to view the terrorist attacks as an assault, not on the US, but on Western civilisation in general.

Their fear/ our fear

I am scared. Scared in a sense that if it did happen, what the hell is going to happen to us? Sheikh Faizal Gaffoor quoted in the *West Australian Newspaper*, 11 November 2005.

Whether the fear of terrorism is perceived as imaginary or real, as inherent to the human condition or historically specific, whether it serves a political purpose or fulfils a deep seated psychological need, the argument in this paper is that the fear of terrorism in Australia has manifested through the reaffirmation of commitment to a common set of values, the maintenance of cultural world views and the marginalisation and rejection of anything that is perceived to threaten these values and world views.

In 2004 George Kateb warned that that identifying terrorism as an object of fear for political purposes has social consequences. Kateb warned that

terrorism has the capacity to become a metonym for a much larger enemy made up of Arabs and Muslims around the world and states that

For terrorism to be adequate to the project of imperialism, for imperialism to be sustainable publicly and rhetorically, terrorism must be falsely associated with Arabs and Muslims everywhere. For this idea to take hold, ordinary people have to refuse to make distinctions among Arabs and Muslims, all of whom are assumed to be actually or potentially guilty of terrorism, just by their ascribed identity. (p. 3)

Kateb's caveat illuminates the complex relationship between fear of terrorism as a kind of political fear and the fears of Muslims in Australia as a kind of politically repressive fear. The media portrayal of September 11 and the subsequent war on terror as a clash between two culturally and religiously incompatible ideologies, fulfils the central requirements of both expressions of political fear: fear of a foreign or distant enemy and repressive fear expressed as fear of Muslims in Australia. In this manner, these two kinds of fear are closely connected and reinforce each other. On the one hand, the media serves to perpetuate an understanding of terrorism as a non-political phenomenon, thus fulfilling the basic premise of political fear. In portraying terrorism as non-political, the media also serves to perpetuate repressive fear by defining Islam, and by inference Muslims around the world, including Australia, as the objects of fear. On November 9, 2005, the front page of the *West Australian Newspaper* featured a Melbourne cleric among those arrested in dawn raids by the Australian Federal Police as suspected terrorists. The headline read "The Enemy Within". Its sub-heading collapsed the terms Muslim, illegal immigrant, terrorist and enemy, thus inferring that all Muslims in Australia were potentially "the enemy within":

Australia gave this *illegal Algerian migrant* a job and a safe place to bring up his six children. He showed his gratitude by telling us Osama Bin Laden was a great man, and now police say Abdul Benbrika leads a gang of *Muslims* who want to blow up their countrymen to smithereens (emphasis added).

Dunn & Mahtani (2001) in a major Australian survey immediately after the September 11 attacks found that more than any other cultural or ethnic group, Muslims and people from the Middle East were thought to be unable to fit into Australia. Fifty-four per cent of those surveyed, mainly women, said they would be concerned if a relative of theirs married a Muslim. The findings of this survey cogently reinforce Kateb's (2004) argument and suggest that, at least to some extent, the political and media construction of terrorism as a clash between the West and Islam has found expression in the popular Australian psyche.

The government and media response to the terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid, Bali and London is central to cultivating a belief that Muslims in Australia pose a real and imminent threat to Australia's national security. Despite assertions from the Prime Minister that the war against terrorism is not a war against Islam and that the counter terrorism measures do not target particular religious or racial groups within the Australian community, the actual response by the government imparts a very different message. In the wake of the London bombings, the Prime Minister called a summit with Muslim representatives from around the nation. In the two hours that they met, the summit developed a Statement of Principles committing members of Muslim communities to challenge violence and extremism. The very need for a summit of this nature and for the development of a Statement of Principles (later endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments or COAG), sends a lucid message to the Australian public that not only are Australian Muslims responsible for terrorism but that they also have the capacity and an onus to prevent or minimise the threat of an attack in Australia.

Since September 11, Australian Muslims, not unlike much of the broader community, have experienced heightened levels of fear. Unlike the broader community, however, these fears are a direct consequence of an increasing number of incidences of violence and verbal abuse directed at Australian Muslims (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004). It is reasonable to suggest that most Australians have not had direct experience of

a terrorist attack. That is not to suggest that global terrorist attacks do not resonate at a personal level with many Australians, particularly those who have lost loved ones through terrorism. However, relatively few Australians have actually had a personal experience of a terrorist attack. In contrast, a substantial number of Muslims in Australia have experienced some form of physical or verbal abuse or discrimination since the September 11 attacks.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report on the *Ismaʿ* project confirms that "...experiences [of vilification and discrimination] are having a profound impact on Arab and Muslim Australians. The biggest impacts are a substantial increase in fear, a growing sense of alienation from the wider community and an increasing distrust of authority" (p. 4). The *Ismaʿ* project also found that Muslims in Australia were particularly concerned about the introduction of counter terrorism measures that would potentially target Muslims and believed that their human rights were at risk of violation under new counter terrorism laws.

Fear finds several expressions among Muslims in Australia: the fear of backlash from some sectors of the wider community; the fear of subversion of Islamic identity in meeting the requirements of a politically defined 'moderate' Islam; the fear of being identified as a potential terrorist or 'person of interest' and the fear of potentially losing the rights bestowed on all other citizens are distinct from the fear of a foreign enemy or dangerous presence like terrorism. Like the fear of terrorism, the generation of politically repressive fear throughout a society requires the support and collaboration of different elements within that society, including members of the targeted community. It essentially relies on the ability of social institutions, including the media, to perpetuate a popular belief that Muslims, as a culturally and religiously incompatible 'other', pose a threat to the Australian collective identity and, ostensibly, to Australia's security.

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