

THEIR FEAR- OUR FEAR

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ANNE ALY

Around 220 km south of Cairo lies the city of El Minya in the region known to the Egyptians as “the Saaeed”. A stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood, El Minya was the site of sectarian violence in the late 1990’s and continues to be regarded among Egyptians for its traditionalism and religious conservatism.

In July of this year I visited El Minya to reacquaint myself with the city that is my mother’s birth place and which has been home to my sister since she married a Minyawawi in 1984.

After a 13 year absence, one of the most noticeable changes to the city is the proliferation of women wearing the hijab (or veil, the traditional Islamic dress which covers the hair), among them my 15 year old niece for whom peer pressure from the girls at her high school motivated her decision to don the veil. The increase in the number of women wearing the veil has often been cited as symptomatic of the rise of fundamentalist Islam in modern Arab societies such as Egypt.

One day, my niece and I decided to go for a walk. About five minutes into our walk we saw a man dressed in the traditional Islamic thobe (or long gown), sporting a beard and a shaven head. To my eyes, he looked pious, not unlike many of the men I see everyday when I pick up my children from the local Islamic college here in Perth. My niece obviously saw something different, as he approached she quickly drew me to her side “look out Auntie” she said, “there goes a terrorist. They are the ones we should fear.”

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You may be wondering, given the content of the presentations you’ve heard today where exactly FEAR fits in the context of counter terrorism. For a start, fear is the ultimate aim of terrorists. While there is no single, internationally accepted definition of terrorism, those definitions that do exist agree that terrorism involves the use of violence to inculcate fear in the community.

Secondly, fear is perhaps the most intense of human emotions. At an individual level fear manifests in phobias but at the community level fear impels a society to take civic action, reaffirming its beliefs and values and mobilising against an

identified threat on behalf of these values. From a psychological perspective the impact of community fear is a reaffirmation of commitment to a common set of values or cultural world views. This often finds expression in aggression, marginalisation, alienation and rejection of anything or anyone who challenges those cultural world views.

Thirdly, fear is a powerful political tool- a tool currently being used by Islamists to recruit people, mainly young men, to their cause and I will talk more about that later. Now I am not proposing something as simple as fear plus fundamentalism equals jihad fatwa. But an examination of how fear is operating at the societal level, how people are reacting to it and where it is leading people can provide valuable information for the development of strategies to counter terrorism. The London bombings demonstrate that it is not enough to manage threat and capability, it is also necessary to manage motivation.

Before I go any further, I'd like to just take a minute to introduce my research which is funded by the Australian Research Council's Safeguarding Australia Initiative and is part of a bigger research project to create a metric of fear which can be used to gauge the level of fear of terrorism operating in the community. The purpose of my research is to chart how people are constructing fear of terrorism, comparing the Muslim communities with the broader community. The research is ongoing and to date I've conducted a number of focus groups (ten to be exact) with both members of Muslim communities and the broader community to look at what they fear, the level of fear, what contributes or doesn't to that fear and, perhaps most importantly for today's presentation, where that fear is leading people- how they are reacting to it and what this means to the counter terrorism effort. I'll be presenting some of those findings today and presenting you with an analysis of how the fear of terrorism is playing out at the societal level in WA.

SLIDE

Research participants were asked to rate the likelihood of a terrorist attack in Australia on a scale from 1-5. On this scale, non-Muslims consistently rated the likelihood of an attack as either likely or highly likely compared to Muslims who rated it as either unlikely or highly unlikely. Furthermore, non-Muslims indicated that it was more likely that Australia would experience a terrorist attack from within (similar to the London bombings) than from an external source such as Al Qaida.

SLIDE

Participants were also asked to indicate on a scale from 1-5 how anxious or worried they were about the possible government response to a terrorist attack in Australia and the impact of a terrorist attack on themselves or their family. On this question, Muslims consistently rated their levels of anxiety higher than non-Muslims.

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So what we have then is a social environment where members of the broader Australian community are concerned about the threat of a terrorist attack on Australia, particularly the threat of “homegrown terrorism” while members of Muslim communities are more concerned about the possible repercussions and the backlash of a terrorist attack.

This is not surprising when you consider some of the reports of aggression and vilification that came out after the September 11 2001 attacks in the US where Australian Muslims were targeted. One respondent who was working at a Muslim college at the time recalls:

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I came to work in the morning. Everybody was scared about the security of the school so we locked up the gates. There was this notion going on that the children might be harmed, the school might be damaged in one way or another. Everyone was concerned about the safety of the children. Because people believed that there was going to be a backlash inevitably

The kind of fear expressed by Muslims is also not surprising when you consider that the evolving media and political discourse on terrorism constructs Australian Muslims as not only a terrorist threat but also a threat to so called “Australian values” although there is little detail available as to what exactly those values are and how exactly the presence of Muslims in Australia constitutes a threat to them. Muslim participants expressed that they felt they were being targeted by the media and by politicians and that the media frequently identified them as terrorists.

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The media has directed the westerners that it is the Muslims, it is Al Qaeda who are behind it and unfortunately the people start looking at you like oh, you're the guilty one. The law says you are innocent until proven guilty and it has changed that rule by saying you are guilty until proven innocent. So basically we were victimised and anything happens around the world now, any attack, any thing the fingers are pointed at us no matter what.

The media and the government love to create a monster you know to feed and frighten the people. Now we are the monster.

There is a very salient fear 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. This fear or fears are grounded in the political and the media response to terrorism that perpetuates 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. Importantly it is a fear that is based on a perception of Muslims as victims and cultivates a siege mentality among the Australian Muslim communities.

While I thoroughly believe that fear is well founded given some of the violent and aggressive incidences that were directed against Muslims in Australia post 9/11, that fear can have far reaching impacts. As I mentioned earlier, fear often manifests in a desire for people to maintain their cultural world views. When we feel threatened, we tend to search for a sense of meaning, stability, permanence and order- we tend to want to identify with something bigger than ourselves, something that unites us. The so called 'war on terror' provides just that opportunity.

The political rhetoric on the war on terror relies on sustaining a state of fear and anxiety through which people are motivated to identify as either "us" or "them". This rhetoric presents the world in terms absolute good versus absolute evil. In the West, the terrorists and those associated with them are the evil doers (the axis of evil) whose aim is to destroy freedom and democracy. Why? Because they hate US.

The same concept underlies the messages of the Islamists. To them, the US, the Zionists and the supporters of Israel are the "infidels" whose aim is to oppress Muslims. Why? Because they hate US.

A brief look at just some of the quotes from both sides of the so called war on terror reveals a remarkable resemblance in the language used to garner collective support for their respective agendas.

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George Bush

Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.

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Osama Bin Laden

These events have split the whole world into two camps: the camp of belief and the camp of disbelief.... The whole world is watching this war and the two adversaries; the Islamic nation, on the one hand, and the United States and its allies on the other. It is either victory and glory or misery and humiliation.

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George Bush

Our nation is engaged in a global war on terror that affects the safety and security of every American. In Iraq, Afghanistan and across the world, we face

dangerous enemies who want to harm our people, folks who want to destroy our way of life.

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Osama Bin Laden

I now address my speech to the whole of the Islamic nation...The most important and serious issue today for the whole world is this Third World War, which the Crusader-Zionist coalition began against the Islamic nation

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George Bush

The war on terror continues. The enemies of freedom are not idle, and neither are we. This country will not rest, we will not stop, we will not tire, until this danger to civilization is removed.

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Osama Bin Laden

Jihad in Palestine and Iraq today is a duty for the people of the two countries. If these people failed or showed reluctance to perform Jihad, then it would be the duty of the people close to them [in other countries], and so on until the circle [of Jihad] covers the entire countries of Muslims. The countries of Muslims are like one country.

Al Qaida's stated objective is to create a single Islamic nation to which Bin Laden refers repeatedly in his speeches to which he addresses the Islamic nation, bringing to an end what they perceive as the oppression of Muslims by the West. Propaganda used by Islamist groups including Al Qaida nurtures a belief among Muslims that Muslims around the world are being "victimized". Indeed one of the central methods Islamists use to recruit people to their cause is to expose them to propaganda about perceived injustices to Muslims across the world with international conflict involving Muslims interpreted as examples of widespread war against Islam and conspiracy theories abounding.

There is evidence to suggest that Australian Muslims are increasingly identifying with this notion of a global conspiracy against Islam. The negative stereotypes of Muslims in the Australian media have inculcated a sense of victimhood which Muslims in Australia have used as the basis for the reconstruction of identity and the creation of alternative narratives of belonging. A commonly expressed belief among the Muslim participants in my research is that Muslims around the globe are under attack, the victims of a larger conspiracy aimed at undermining Islamic identity and eradicating Islam as a world religion:

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They are aiming to destroy us and we are not aware of it but now we are under attack we are being destroyed. What about

*realising we are being attacked by purpose not by our people.
And now there are terrorists- all these crimes that are happening
under the name of the Muslims. Who is really behind them?*

Conspiracy theories are popular among Muslims in Australia. The interviews with members of Muslim communities revealed a popular perception that September 11 is part of a bigger US agenda to control the Middle East. Some of the theories verbalised during the interviews included a belief that the CIA was responsible for the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Almost all the Muslims interviewed questioned the capacity of al-Qaeda to perpetrate terrorist attacks on the scale of September 11. Here are some examples:

We never believe that when America go and say Muslim or Al Qaeda . We never believe

I still don't believe that the Muslims can do that or even Osama Bin Laden capable of doing such a thing.

And until now I don't say Muslims done that and I don't agree with anyone who say Muslim done that. This is my opinion- everyone entitled to his opinion

In fact personally, right from the beginning I didn't think that it was Muslims who can do that. They are not capable of doing such an attack. I thought the CIA and the Mosad, the Israelis behind that to put the Muslims in trouble with the world, the rest of the world.

I would say that's exactly what I thought too. It must be a staged plan because no way I felt that there is an organisation let alone an organisation, but even a government, a Muslim government capable of carrying out such a daring and complex logistic of attacking a so called superpower.

This kind of engagement with conspiracy theories around 9/11 that are based on a notion that the US and Israel have an anti- Islamic agenda is evidence of the growing trend for Muslims in Australia to identify with a global Islamic identity based on a common or shared experience of victimhood.

Symptomatic of this trend is growing Muslim distrust of Western media and a tendency to engage with media messages (internet sites, videos, news channels) that lend validity to conspiracy theories and depict Islamic suffering. Even the Arab news channel, Al Jazeera, which has long been suspected of aiding the terrorist agenda, is not immune to conspiracy theories:

there is a lot of people believe that Al Jazeera owned by Israel company and where Israel has a hand, the upper hand over America. Who rules America? The Israelis.

Rejecting Al Jazeera as a viable source of news, some Australian Muslims are turning to another Arab news channel:

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But you look at Al Jazeera they talk in the same tongue as the Western media but in our language. And then you look again at something like al Manar who talks of their own tongue. They do not use the other media's ideas. They have been attacked by the Americans, been attacked by the Israelis and they have their own opinion.

The al- Manar television station to which this respondent refers to is a Lebanese based station run by the militant Hezbollah movement and accessible to Australians via satellite and on the internet. Much like al Jazeera, Al Manar broadcasts images of Iraqi and Palestinian suffering and more recently graphic images of Lebanese casualties of Israeli air strikes. These images are often formatted into video clips accompanied by music and lyrics such as “we do not fear America”. Despite political pressure including a decision by the US to list al-Manar as a terrorist organisation in December 2004, al Manar continues to broadcast videos depicting the US as the “mother of terrorism”. The following short clip from Al Manar is just one example.

PLAY CLIP

The particular brand of propaganda employed by al-Manar is gaining popularity among some Muslims in Australia largely because it affirms their own views and opinions offering them opportunities to engage in an alternative media in which Muslims are the victims, not the aggressors.

Is this something to be concerned about? It would certainly be naïve to suggest that the growing identification with a global war against Islam among Muslims in Australia is of little consequence. The video message left by London bomber Mohammed Siddique Khan is a striking reminder that the concept of a global divide between us and them is a powerful message for vulnerable minds:

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“Our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer.

Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters.

Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will

not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation....

The MI5 report on the London Bombings asserts that British intelligence has been unable to establish a link between Al Qaeda and the four young British citizens who carried out the bombings. It also asserts that there is little evidence of overt compulsion by an individual or organization stating "the extremists appear rather to rely on the development of individual commitment and group bonding and solidarity." Importantly the report also states that "Conspiracy theories also abounded, at least some of the bombers seem to have expressed the view that the 9/11 attacks were a plot by the US."

However, there are a couple of points to be made- one is that the belief in conspiracy theories simply cannot be taken as completely symptomatic of terrorist tendencies. If statistics released by the US Truth Movement are to be believed only 2% of Americans believe that 9/11 was perpetrated by al Qaeda. The second thing is that the focus groups also revealed that the Australian Muslims interviewed have an understanding and awareness not only of their own fears and motivations but also of how a global divide is being created and sustained to serve different agendas. Many asserted that Muslims in Australia need to take an active role in dispelling myths and negative stereotypes that are perpetuated by an unsympathetic media. Many also demonstrated an awareness of the propensity to associate with conspiracy theories and were able to contextualize them and be critically analytical about them:

Well I would think about it this way. We have been raised always carrying the conspiracy theory as middle Easterners because we always think people conspiring against us, so the first impression you will get is 'wait a minute I think it's a conspiracy against us'

A Muslim Egyptian blogger who goes by the name of Sandmonkey provides a humorous and insightful analysis of this mindset. He refers to a concept of the APU or the Arab Parallel Universe which is governed by 7 rules.

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In the APU the Zionists and the Americans are always to blame for everything that is wrong in the APU ("*Drug use rise in Egypt? Israel is shipping drugs free to Egypt to destroy our naïve helpless youth! STD levels rising? STD & HIV infected Israelis moussad girls who come here to infect our virile Egyptian men with AIDS are to blame.*"). In the APU good leadership is inversely related to how US friendly a leader is and any media that is not the official state-owned media is filled with Zionist, Jewish, American, Christian, imperialist, anti arab influences and they LIE ALL THE TIME.

The question that is left to ask is just how big a step is it from believing in conspiracy theories, identifying with a notion of a global holocaust directed

against Islam, watching the propaganda messages of al Manar and becoming a suicide bomber? The case of the London bombings demonstrates the difficulty for police and local communities in identifying potential terrorists. All 4 bombers showed little outward signs that would arouse suspicion of terrorist intentions and prior to the bombings became increasingly isolated from their own Muslim communities. What the case does show is that a perceived sense of injustice against Muslims by the West is a common motivator for would be terrorists and a powerful tool used by Islamists to recruit people. It is a tool that is aided not only by the language of Osama Bin Laden's Islamic nation but also by Western politicians and the media that constructs Australian Muslims as the object of fear and as an incompatible "out of place" other.

The paradox of fear, then, is that the fear of terrorism sustains a social climate that actually motivates terrorism. In other words, the use of fear as a political tool creates and perpetuates a social climate in which Australian Muslims feel victimised as the objects of fear and blame. These feelings find validation in the concept of a global conspiracy against Islam in which the US and Israel are coconspirators with the ultimate aim of oppressing Muslims.

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The implications of this are that counter terrorism efforts need to address the motivation for terrorism as well as manage the threat and capability. There is very little we can do about global events such as the ongoing crises in the Middle East that provide further fuel that the Islamists can use as evidence of the need for an Islamic nation to fight the infidel. What can be done is a targetted effort to counter the Islamists message and ensure that those who are most vulnerable to this message, young men who experience alienation and marginalisation, are exposed to different messages that encourage them to reconstruct their identity based not on a common perception of Muslims as victims but on a common perception of Muslims as active Australian citizens. This is a challenge. It's a challenge for all Australians to recognise and understand that fear directed at a diverse and broad community of Australian Muslims is fear misplaced. It's a challenge for government, policy makers and those working in counter terrorism to develop strategies that target the motivation for terrorism. Above all it's a challenge for Australian Muslims to find other ways of identifying that are not based on a common perception of victimhood and fear. Ways that empower them to participate actively and fully as political, economic and social citizens. The fight against terrorism can only be aided by a fight against fear: their fear and ours.

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