



Features

There's something radically wrong about declarations of jihad

Halim Rane

584 words

5 August 2009

The Courier-Mail

COUMAI

1 - First with the news

31

English

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Extremist Islamist groups have misunderstood the difference between religion and national security issues, writes **Halim Rane**

THE alleged plot by a small group of Australian citizens of Somali and Lebanese background to attack the Holsworthy army base in western Sydney highlights the persistence of ill-conceived approaches to Islam among some of its adherents.

The common thread among those prepared to engage in acts of violence and terrorism against Western targets seems to be poor levels of education, particularly concerning the subjects to which their grievances relate: the foreign policies of certain Western governments as well as the concept of jihad and relations with non-Muslims.

For most jihadist groups, the Somali al-Shabab included, there is a perception that Western governments identify Islam as an enemy.

The proposition is ridiculous and without merit. An examination of US foreign policy towards the Muslim world going back to 1992 shows that religion has never been a factor.

US foreign policy is shaped by security and strategic considerations, and not cultural differences.

In fact, the religion of Islam has been praised by numerous US presidents, its values have been regarded as consistent with those of the West.

The same can be said in the context of Australia.

In brief, the quarrel of the Western world is not with Islam but with extremism and terrorism. The bottom line of this discussion is that Muslims are more free to practise Islam in Western countries such as Australia than in many Muslim-majority countries.

As for the concept of jihad and relations with non-Muslims, the views of most jihadist groups are completely out of place in the modern world, reflecting the norms of a pre-modern world that have no relevance today.

The age of empires that subscribe to one religion or another, accept war as the normal basis of relations, and categorise subjects according to their religious affiliation is over.

Today, the world is divided into nation states, most of which (including all Muslim nations) belong to the UN, the charter of which declares peace as the normal basis of relations. Muslims who live in the West are today equal citizens with their fellow nationals of various faiths.

The Koran's verses concerning jihad need to be read in context, historical and contemporary.

Jihad needs to be understood according to its higher objectives expressed in the Koran: self-defence, overcoming oppression, and establishing a just peace.

Moreover, Muslims must rethink the essential message of the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, which were not about subjugating women, imposing crude forms of punishment, or waging holy war against non-Muslims. They were about faith in no deity except God; basic rights, opportunities and dignity for all; protection from harm and promotion of welfare.

It is perhaps ironic that these ``Islamic" ideals should be most successfully implemented in Western nations such as Australia.

None of these is achieved by attacking innocent civilians, the infrastructure of a sovereign nation, or even the military of a Western nation that has no gripe with Islam but in fact practises what some Muslims have neglected to preach.

Dr **Halim Rane** is the deputy director of the Griffith Islamic Research Unit and a lecturer in the National Centre of Excellence in Islamic Studies at Griffith University. His book, *Reconstructing Jihad Amid Competing International Norms* (Palgrave Macmillan) is available online or from major bookstores for \$75.

CML-20090805-1-031-212621

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