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Features
A twisted message

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A new way of combating Islamic extremism is needed, writes **Halim Rane**

'Jihad in Islam is striving or making an effort as an act of devotion to God'

POLICE raids on the homes of suspected terrorists in Sydney and Melbourne this week have put the spotlight on Islam and Australia's Muslim community.

A reported statement by one of those arrested to the effect that an attack on Australia would constitute, from an Islamic perspective, a legitimate form of jihad is grossly misguided.

The concept of jihad originated in the 7th century. After the Prophet Mohammed and his followers escaped the persecution of the Meccans, verses of the Koran were revealed that gave permission to fight in order to defend themselves.

These verses came with strict instructions to "not transgress the limits set by God" -- a reference to Islam's standards governing armed conflicts, which include the prohibition of harming "non-combatants": women, children, the sick, elderly and those taking shelter in places of worship.

Two salient issues emerge from the Koranic context.

First, jihad in Islam is striving or making an effort as an act of devotion to God.

It can take the form of prayer and charity or some form of physical or intellectual effort in order to help others.

Jihad can also take the form of armed struggle or resistance.

The critical factor, in order for such cases to be Islamically legitimate, however, is that the armed struggle is for self-defence or resistance to some form of overt oppression or foreign occupation.

Saying that Muslims are oppressed in Australia is a ridiculous and baseless argument.

Muslims, like all other Australians, enjoy freedoms, protections and services that are among the best in the world. There is little room for complaint, let alone feelings of being oppressed or exploited.

The overwhelming majority of Australians, Muslims included, recognise this. Those who simply cannot appreciate what we Australians, from all our diverse backgrounds, have built, should seriously reconsider their perspective or consider emigration.

The second point is that innocent lives or civilians must be protected and cannot be harmed.

Acts of terrorism by their nature are generally indiscriminate; they involve the targeting of innocent people in order to achieve particular, usually political, ends.

The would-be victims of an attack on Australian soil are innocent of any war that is being waged against people overseas.

Murder, which is in effect the result of a terrorist act, is forbidden in Islam.

In fact, life is considered so sacred in Islam that the Koran equates the taking of an innocent life with

killing the whole of humanity.

From the Islamic perspective, a militant act cannot be considered a legitimate jihad if it is directed at anything other than the attacking or occupying force.

Many Australians and people the world over, Muslim and non-Muslim, are strongly opposed to wars and occupation; perhaps none more so than the US-led war on Iraq and Israel's 38-year old military occupation of Palestine.

It would be naive, indeed downright erroneous, to assume that Iraq and Palestine are not central to the grievance of Muslims everywhere.

However, even American and Israeli violations of human rights and international humanitarian law that we witness in Iraq and Palestine respectively cannot justify acts of terrorism.

For Australian Muslims the legitimate means of opposing such situations is through our democratic processes.

What to do about those few who do not value the use of democratic processes for the expression of opposition?

The Government recently has passed anti-terrorist legislation that may be effective in treating some of the symptoms of extremism.

That it will effectively treat the causes is doubtful.

In the case of extremist Muslims, the problem is with both their understanding of Islam and their world view.

Particularly among some Muslim youth there also may well be issues concerning their self-perception, alienation, lack of skills or qualifications, and unemployment or underemployment.

The successful combating of extremism among Muslims must involve an Islamic education program that is free of the ideological and cultural baggage of the madrassa-educated mullahs.

The main objectives of this should be the establishment of a moderate or balanced Muslim community with a sound understanding of Islam led by home-grown Imams who equally value their faith, country and all its people.

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