Anthony Bubalo
Putting Terrorism into Perspective

One can be cynical about the Government's publication of a report on terrorism in the lead-up to an election. Nonetheless, whatever its motives, yesterday's White Paper on terrorism was welcome.

Usually Australians hear the Government's thinking on this issue through sound-bytes, travel warnings and the occasional speech - none of which is conducive to the nuanced discussion of a complex subject. By contrast, the White Paper sets out the Government's views in a more comprehensive way.

The Paper makes some important points. It correctly identifies al-Qaeda's brand of terrorism as something distinct from the terrorism that individual countries like Egypt faced in the 1980s and 90s.

Unlike earlier radical Islamists, al-Qaeda is not primarily driven by the goal of promoting revolutions in individual states. Its chief target is the West, and its cause is the inherently slippery idea of a transnational Islamic community – as if the enormous diversity that exists amongst millions of Muslims is negated by the mere fact they share a common religion.

The White Paper challenges the furphy of a link between al-Qaeda and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As the scholar of political Islam Olivier Roy has observed, the new generation of radicals did not flock to Palestine to fight, they went to Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia and more recently to New York and Madrid. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians, important in its own right, may starve the fire of some fuel, but it won't put it out.

In its treatment of the ideological underpinnings of terrorism the White Paper cautions against confusing al-Qaeda's philosophy with so-called mainstream Islam. This is laudable, but one needs to tread carefully.

To label al-Qaeda misinterpreters of Islam is to assume there is one correct interpretation. There isn't. Moreover non-Muslims are hardly qualified to define what Islam says when Muslims have a hard enough time doing it. Far better to leave the debate about Islam to them and cast our distinctions in terms of those who obey the law and those who don't.

The paper presents a more nuanced picture of al-Qaeda's relationship with its regional affiliates, including those in Southeast Asia. Particularly welcome is the focus on the transmission of al-Qaeda's ideas and the example it has provided to groups such as al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyah (JI).

The ideological question goes to the heart of our effort to understand how enduring this threat will be. Eventually most of al-Qaeda's members will be captured or killed. Whether we continue to face this type of terrorism will, therefore, depend on the extent to which other radical Islamists adopt the al-Qaeda model.

As the White Paper says, JI in Indonesia seems to have done so. This was reflected most tragically in the Bali bombing. But is the Paper too quick to draw the conclusion that this model has been irrevocably assimilated?

Even a radical organisation like JI will eventually face the choice that confronted Islamists in the Middle East in the 1990s. Terrorism is fine if, like al-Qaeda, your goals are more apocalyptic than political but is usually not enough to overthrow governments.

To do so you generally need to mobilise large segments of the population. Islamist organisations have traditionally pursued this approach through propagation, social welfare activities and the like. But it is difficult to do any of these if you are a secret organisation whose members are constantly on the run, in jail or dead.

At the end of the 1990s the Egyptian Islamist organisation, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyah, recognised that it could not combine terrorism with revolution and abandoned terrorism. In Iraq today militants are increasingly split over the nihilistic violence which parts of the opposition blame on "foreign elements" – though only because they know such violence is condemning the entire opposition in the eyes of the Iraqi people.

Indeed there are indications of a debate within JI over whether it should focus on more populist, though still violent, activities such as fomenting Muslim-Christian unrest, rather than terrorist spectaculars, which tend to alienate the broader Indonesian Muslim community.

This is not to say we should be sanguine about the future. Whatever its tactical considerations, an organisation like JI will undoubtedly continue to be violent. But we should understand that if it continues down the al-Qaeda path it will condemn itself to remaining a marginal, if still destructive, player in its own society. A JI able to mobilise masses and command political power would be a much more worrying prospect.

This points to a more fundamental issue: namely, the need to start putting the terrorist threat into perspective. No-one can deny terrorism's human cost or that it is an extremely serious problem. But is it really "total war", as Mr Downer described it yesterday, when terrorists are still only able to inflict a fraction of the damage that nation states can cause each other?

Less than 15 years ago the world faced the possibility of total annihilation through nuclear conflict. Today we face the prospect of 10 million Chinese being infected with HIV by 2010. We should be worried by the aspirations of terrorists to acquire weapons of mass destruction, but this only reinforces an already urgent need to strengthen global non-proliferation and counter-proliferation efforts.

It is unreasonable to expect the White Paper to canvass these broader questions. But let's hope this worthwhile setting out of the Government's thinking also helps provoke a much needed debate about where terrorism sits in the overall spectrum of strategic challenges.

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