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**With a terrorist threat out in the open, it is time to confront the causes**

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Since September 11, 2001 we in Australia — like people all over the world — have been trying to get the problem of terrorism into perspective. As the years have passed it has become harder if anything to understand the nature and scale of the problem, and harder to think sensibly about how we should respond to it. And now this.

There is a lot we still do not know about the activities that gave rise to this week's arrests. But if the allegations made by the police are proven in court — and on that we must keep an open mind — then we have been brought face to face with the age of terrorism in our land. What can we learn from this to help us understand the broader problem, and reach more sensible conclusions about how to respond to it? Four things are clear.

First, the threat is starting to become familiar. The latest allegations may be shocking, but they are hardly surprising. Within a few months of September 11, the direct risk to Australia from militant Islamic terrorism was evident. Not long after the attacks, Dennis Richardson, then head of ASIO, said a significant terrorist attack in Australia was "inevitable". That an attack here was as likely to be mounted by Australians as by foreigners was also understood. So the claims made this week read more like a grim confirmation of what we knew than a ghastly and unexpected revelation.

It will be important to remember this because it would be easy to assume a radically new and more serious threat to Australia's security has been revealed. That would be wrong. This week's charges simply underline that we live in a time of legitimate concern about the risk of endemic militant Islamic terrorism.

The challenge is to recognise this danger, understand how serious it is, keep our equilibrium in the face of it, and respond effectively. If we keep seeing each new attack — and each claim of a planned attack — as a new threat requiring a new response, we will never regain our equilibrium in the face of a threat which — for the time being, at least — we must live with.

Second, as the threat becomes more familiar, it is easier to understand its true nature. The allegations against at least some of those arrested are that they planned attacks which might have killed tens or even hundreds of people. But, even if that is proved, that is all they would have achieved. Nothing alleged about this plot matches the apocalyptic anxieties of those who claim terrorism threatens the existence of our society. Terrorists may dream that a meaningless crime might help create a global fundamentalist caliphate. There is no reason for us to share this fantasy. It can only encourage them.

Third, we have seen a reassuring display of the strength of an open, accountable, contestable legal system.

Last week's amendments to the criminal code closed an important loophole that should never have been left open. Now terrorism suspects are being held, charged and tried under the ordinary criminal law — a win for us all.

Fourth, we need to pay some attention to what seems to be the ordinariness of the 17 people accused of involvement in plans for a terrorist attack in Australia. How do such people come

to contemplate such crimes? Obviously the vast majority of Australia's Muslims abhor terrorism. But equally obviously, a large number of Muslims in Australia, and around the world, believe that the globalised culture of the West is to some extent hostile to their religion and values. It might make sense to contest the accuracy of that belief. But one can hardly doubt that it is widely and sincerely held, and one can at least understand why many Muslims might think that way. It is from this large pool of those who feel alienated by reason of their faith and culture that the few who might contemplate terrorism are drawn.

If the police accusations are true, this week's arrests show us the danger that a small number of disaffected people will attempt — and sometimes succeed in performing — desperate acts of pointless violence in the belief that they are striking a blow for Islam against what they see as an implacably hostile West. Finding ways to correct that mistaken impression is the only long-term solution to this problem. The good news will be if this week's events point us down this path.

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