

**Presentation to the NSW Counter Terrorism
Command Strategy Unit
2 April 2008**

Good morning. I was invited here today to talk about the role of the media in counter-terrorism. However I thought I would also touch on a subject that is closer to my heart - or, to be more precise, has occupied much of my work for the past three or four years. That subject is the individuals I have got to know who have been involved in the global jihadist movement; individuals who have been associated with terrorists or terror organizations, or have themselves been accused of terrorist related activities.

Through my work I have spent a lot of time with some of these people and have got to know some of them quite well. I thought this would be an area in which I can provide you with some genuine insights – into the characters and beliefs of these individuals, and what motivates them.

First, I'll make some brief comments on the media and terrorism. I was a speaker at a conference in Melbourne last year held by Monash University and the Victoria Police on the theme of 'Counter-terrorism policing in a multi-cultural community'. Its focus was on how to preserve social cohesion in the context of counter-terrorism policing; ie, how to catch and dissuade terrorists and prevent terrorist acts from occurring, without creating new terrorists in the process – an enduring dilemma in the task of countering terrorism.

I was introduced there by David Wright Neville from Monash's Global Terrorism Research Centre, who announced 'Sally Neighbour is here to talk about the role of the media in counter-terrorism'. I think I blanched visibly. It wasn't quite what I thought I was there to talk about, and I responded along the lines of 'Well hang on, I'm not sure the media *does* have "a role in counter-terrorism..."

It's an interesting point. The media's own perception of its role in this area is quite different from the perception of government, the police, intelligence agencies and others whose role it is to catch terrorists.

Another speaker at that conference, Professor Ronald Crelinsten, a Canadian academic, has written extensively about the media and terrorism and refers to the media as a 'governance tool' in CT. That really sets off alarm bells for journalists such as myself. I didn't have chance to share my views on this with Professor Crelinsten but I will share them with you. My view is that the media cannot and must not allow itself to be used as a 'governance tool' – on the issue of counter-terrorism or anything else. Nor do I believe that the media has a 'role in counter-terrorism', although I should add that I use that term in its narrow sense.

The media's role is to report accurately, fairly and responsibly the very real danger that terrorism poses, without sensationalising it or exacerbating community fear and hatred. And by the way I'm the first to admit that about half the time the media does a very poor job of this, and that its reporting is sloppy, unfair, inaccurate, unbalanced and sensational.

The flip-side of that role is an equally pressing responsibility to examine, document and critique how counter-terrorism policy is being implemented, both in a political sense and an intelligence and policing sense. In order to fulfil this crucial second part of its role, the media *has to be* separate from and independent of the counter-terrorism process, rather than a part of it.

This is particularly so where the issue of terrorism has become politicized, and even, on occasions, used for political ends, as I believe it has in Australia and elsewhere.

For me, reporting on how the government does its job and how you do your jobs is just as important a part of *my* job as reporting on the terrorists.

I should add at this point that I have the greatest regard for our counter-terrorism agencies. Your job is far more difficult, and more important, than mine. I am well aware there has been a great deal of annoyance and resentment among some CT agencies over the media's coverage in this area. The AFP deeply resented the coverage of the Haneef case. I imagine ASIO wasn't too happy with reporting of the Ul Haque case. And I understand the NSW Police were very unimpressed with some of the coverage of Zak Mullah case – which was pointed out to me in no uncertain terms after my recent 4 Corners program which touched on that matter.

I appreciate that it is all too easy to criticise and second-guess a terrorism investigation after the event, and after any immediate threat has passed, with the benefit of hindsight. And it must be

particularly galling when this is done by amateur commentators with no real knowledge or insight.

Mick Keelty alluded to this in a speech he made at Sydney Institute recently in which he seemed to be calling for a complete media blackout on terrorism cases once proceedings are in train.

I believe that to argue this is to misjudge the community's view and expectations on this very important issue. People want the implementation of CT policy to be transparent and lawful and fair, and the media has a crucial role in this. I believe the debate we've been having in the last few years over how we deal with terrorism – the crime versus war model, the civil liberties arguments, the special laws, the treatment of remand prisoners, the use of control orders, and so on – like similar debates in the US and elsewhere – is one of the most important debates of our generation. And I think we should all be willing to engage in that debate.

That's all I have to say for now on the media's role. I'm happy to take questions from you on this. But before I do, I thought I would go on to make some observations on some of the individuals I have got to know through my work - Jack Roche, Jack Thomas, Mamdouh Habib, and Rabiah Hutchinson.

First let me digress again and tell you how I got into this area in the first place. In 2002 at 4 Corners we were working on a story about the then little known Indonesian militant group, JI. In the middle of our filming of that story, the Bali bombings occurred and became the focus of our report. It was the first of a series of

stories I did for 4 Corners on JI, in the course of which I ended up with so much information that I decided to write a book. ‘In the Shadow of Swords’ was essentially the history of JI - who they were, what they wanted, and why they were doing it.

After finishing the book in 2004, I thought I was ‘over’ terrorism. But what kept me interested in the subject was the stories of the individuals who have become involved in the jihadist movement – not just the bombers, but the people with very strong personal connections with organisations like JI and Al Qaeda, people who went to Afghanistan, did the training, met bin Laden, and shared a deep personal commitment to the cause, although not necessarily to violence.

I’m interested in these people because to me, as a journalist, trying to understand these people – who they are, where they come from, how they formed their views, what motivates them – is the best way I can contribute to our understanding of the nature of terrorism. And I believe that if we can understand it, we may be better able to deal with it.

SLIDE - JACK ROCHE

The first of these individuals is Jack Roche. I met Roche in 2003 while doing a story for 4 Corners on JI’s Australian connections. At the time Roche was in Perth’s Hakea prison awaiting trial on a charge of having conspired to bomb the Israeli embassy in Canberra. He ended up pleading guilty mid-trial and was sentenced to 9 years, of which he served a reduced term. He was released last year.

I visited Jack Roche in prison three or four times while researching that story, and later went back and visited him another three or four times while researching my book on JI. Late last year, after his release, I went back again and spent a couple of days with him to talk more about his involvement with JI.

Roche is an interesting case, although to me they all are. On the face of it, Roche fits a pattern - the dysfunctional troubled loner who finds meaning and solace in Islam.

POWERPOINT - ROCHE

- Alcoholic, failed marriages, bankrupt, mid-life crisis
- Troubled childhood
- Thoughtful, considered, sincere, intelligent.. ‘good Muslim’. Politics; deeply committed to Palestinian cause – main motivator.
- Found Islam – the convert experience
- Brotherhood; egalitarianism - all men equal before God; moral superiority; converts welcomed
- What it offered: new ‘family’; order to disordered life; ‘instant’ wife; new role – translator & confidante of Bashir and Sungkar

You may know the American forensic psychologist, author and terrorism specialist Marc Sageman, who was formerly a CIA operative in control of funding and support to the Afghan mujahidin in the 1980s. Sageman has done the most definitive

study of individuals who join the jihadist movement, which is documented in his book 'Understanding Terror Networks'.

Sageman finds that the single most common factor in the evolution of a terrorist is alienation. According to his research 78% of the individuals he studied joined the movement while living abroad, away from their homes, while socially and spiritually isolated. He writes that, typically, such alienated individuals 'become embedded in a socially disembedded network, which, precisely because of its lack of any anchor to any society, is free to follow abstract and apocalyptic notions of a global war between good and evil'.

This observation is very apt when considering the case of Jack Roche. The question is how does someone like Roche cross the line, and commit himself to violent jihad.

POWERPOINT – ROCHE

- Individual gains exalted role through membership of group – insider, confidant, translator, part of 'in group'
- Exposed to/indoctrinated in jihadist ideology
- Finds sympathy for cause, eg a Palestinian state
- Believes the cause to be sanctified by God; 'good vs evil', he is on the side of 'good'
- Sense of self as 'a/the chosen one' (Roche recruited by Hambali)
- No longer in control – travels to Afghanistan, undergoes training, meets al Qaeda leaders, events now beyond his control

- Rationalisation – acting in a ‘support role’ only; Jews, not Australians, to be the target

The bombing of the Israeli embassy never went ahead, for a number of reasons. There was an internal squabble within JI, essentially a turf war between JI’s operations chief, Hambali, who had seconded Roche, and the leaders of JI’s Australian branch, the Indonesian brothers Abdul Rahim and Abdul Rahman Ayub, who resented Hambali doing ‘al Qaeda business’ on their turf. Apparently because of these ructions, the job was eventually called off by Abu Bakar Bashir. In the meantime Roche had tried several times to contact ASIO, he says to tell them all about it. My take on this is that Roche had got cold feet, assumed the authorities would get wind of it, and wanted to turn the heat on the Ayubs and away from himself. In any event, the authorities only learned of the plot two years later in the aftermath of the Bali bombings.

CONCLUSIONS - ROCHE

- Potency of the convert experience and powerful appeal of Islam
- Conviction of being on the right side of a holy struggle, battle between good and evil
- Demonstrates how easy it is to justify the use of violence – not always one big leap, but a series of small and seemingly quite logical steps, which can take someone over the ‘violence threshold’ (David Wright-Neville, Monash University)

- Motivations - NOT immorality, cowardice or weakness; on the contrary a **very powerful morality and conviction** that makes it easy to rationalise the taking of life.

SLIDE - JACK THOMAS

I first met Jack Thomas in early 2005. Like Roche he was awaiting trial, on two charges of providing resources to al Qaeda and two additional charges of receiving funds from al Qaeda and travelling on a falsified passport.

I spent the next year on and off making a program which we broadcast on 4 Corners in early 2006 after the end of his trial, as per our agreement with him and his lawyers.

Thomas was acquitted on the two charges of providing resources to al Qaeda and convicted of the other two charges of receiving funds and having a falsified passport. His convictions were subsequently overturned when the record of interview conducted by the AFP was found to be unlawful. Thomas is currently facing a re-trial based on my interview with him. I will be a witness for the prosecution and the matter is of course sub judice, so I won't be canvassing the evidence but will confine myself to what's already on the public record and a few personal observations.

Like Roche, Thomas is a convert and so there are inevitably some similarities in their experience, but beyond that Thomas is a very different individual to Roche.

POWERPOINT – THOMAS

- Happy loving family life, popular, girlfriends
- NOT dysfunctional or desperate; a young idealist in search of meaning (Buddhism, sky diving, travel..) Larrikin streak – ‘boys own adventure’
- Thoughtful, sincere; Political views, social justice.
- Islam a positive attraction – egalitarianism, justice – and a positive influence on his life
- Found a wife – intelligent, educated, beautiful
- Unsophisticated, naïve – Islam the answer to all problems
- Afghanistan – events take their own course

In 2000, Thomas travelled with his family to Afghanistan to join the Taliban. He was going to help create a utopian Islamic state, as he tells it. Thomas wanted to join the Taliban to fight the Northern Alliance and so was enrolled for military training. The camp he was sent to was an al Qaeda camp, although he claims he didn't know this until Osama bin Laden showed up there one day. Thomas completed his training and went off to the front line for about a day, but says he didn't see any fighting.

Then September 11 happened – and everything changed. We have to always keep reminding ourselves of this. The way we assess people's actions must be influenced by whether it was before or after September 11. Before 9/11, clearly al Qaeda was already a terrorist group, but this fact was not universally known. There were plenty of people in al Qaeda camps before that date who didn't realise they were attending terrorist training. It is well documented now that for many young

Muslims going off to do military training or to fight with the Taliban was something of a ‘rite of passage’.

The evidence regarding whether or not Thomas was involved in or willing to be involved in terrorism has been well canvassed and I don’t propose to go into it here. But suffice to say he was found not guilty by a jury of the charges of involvement in terrorism-related activities.

Clearly, however, Thomas was prepared to fight for the cause – the creation of an Islamic state. Like Roche, Thomas was convinced that it was a just and legitimate struggle, and sanctified by God. It gave him meaning and purpose in life, and elevated his own modest existence by giving him a role in a momentous and historic struggle.

SLIDE - MAMDOUH HABIB

Mamdouh Habib is in a category all his own – a true ‘maverick’. I first reported on Habib in 2004 for 4 Corners while he was still in Guantanamo Bay. I met him last year while researching a program on the use of torture, for which I intended to interview him. I found his story so compelling that we ended up instead making a two-part special including a separate program on Habib’s rendition by the CIA to Egypt where he was detained and tortured for several months before being sent to Guantanamo.

I spent a lot of time with Habib getting him to tell me his story, a very time consuming task because he is quite a disordered thinker and talker. However I came to respect him because of

the strength I saw in his character which enabled him to endure - regardless of what he did to get there - a terrible ordeal in Egypt.

POWERPOINT – HABIB

- Maverick, volatile, ‘aggressive’, history of depression
- Trouble-magnet – fight in Haldon Street, New York demonstrations, Afghanistan, bin Laden t-shirt
- His own loud mouth got him arrested
- Activities in Afghanistan?? No evidence he’s a terrorist (too loose a cannon)
- TORTURE
- ‘injustice syndrome’ – obsessed with the injustice he has suffered

The problem with Mamdouh Habib - and part of the reason he continues to attract the attention of Australian authorities - is that in some ways he is his own worst enemy; he brings trouble down upon himself. He doesn't do so intentionally, but because he is simply not willing to put up with anything he deems to be a continuation of the injustice he has suffered. He is somewhat paranoid – I would be too if I had endured what he has. He has ongoing problems with the NSW police, partly because it seems no police officer can simply walk past him – and nor can he walk past them – without some encounter taking place. Like the recent fracas at a McDonalds restaurant over which Habib is facing charges after allegedly calling a police officer a ‘piece of shit’. Habib is a classic example of the importance in counter-terrorism of community engagement. He’s a difficult case but I

hope it's a case that can be dealt with because Habib doesn't deserve any more punishment.

SLIDE - RABIAH HUTCHINSON

Rabiah Hutchinson is the subject of my forthcoming book, *The Mother of Mohammed*. I'm not going to divulge all my research to you because of course I want you all to buy the book. Nor am I going to tell you anything she has said to me in confidence because that would be a betrayal of her trust, but rest assured there is nothing she has told me that would concern you. I'm going to touch on her only because it is now a matter of public knowledge that I am writing book about her, and she is the most interesting by far of these individuals.

I first learned of Rabiah in 2003 while researching my book on JI. I began hearing stories about this tough feisty 'red head' – in fact she's a brunette but she has the temperament of a red-head, hence the misnomer stuck - who was married to the Australian leader of JI, Abdul Rahim Ayub. People told me that she'd been desperate to go off and join the jihad herself but the menfolk wouldn't allow it. Eventually she divorced Ayub and headed off anyway. I tried for many months to find Rabiah but I couldn't. After 'In the Shadow of Swords' was published I resumed my efforts; I wrote her letters and sent her a copy of the book; I knocked on the doors of houses where she'd been living, but had no luck. Finally I made contact with her last year. I wanted to do a 4 Corners program on her, which she initially agreed to, but which didn't eventuate, for reasons I won't go into here. But to cut a long story short, she did agree to cooperate with me in the writing of a book.

I have spent the past six months visiting Rabiah once or twice a week. So far I've spent about 100 hours with her, and have got to know her, I believe, quite well. Personally I don't see her as a threat to national security – but that's not my assessment to make.

POWERPOINT - RABIAH

- She is tough! (wears the niqab – you have to be tough; four years in mujahidin camp in Pakistan; four months on the run post 9/11)
- Dogmatic, religiously 'extreme', Salafist ('pious predecessors')
- Poor rural upbringing; divorced family; mother & grandfather very strict, moral discipline – modesty, honesty, hard work, self-reliance.
- Search for meaning and belonging
- Appeal of Islam – clarity, simplicity, order, logic; egalitarianism, social justice
- 'Self-indoctrinated', not by others; she chose it.
- Religious conviction
- Lifestyle choice (Afghanistan)
- \$64,000 question: Does she support terrorism?
Killing unlawful under Islam; no justification for killing civilians. 9/11 'an act of war'.

Conclusion and questions.

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