

The Media Battle

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As you can see, the title I've chosen for my talk today is 'the media battle'. (slide 1)
I've taken it from a quote from Ayman al Zawahiri in July 2005:

'We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media... We are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our umma.' (Ayman al Zawahiri, July 2005.) (slide 2)

Since the events of September 11, the Islamist jihad - and the so-called 'war on terror' waged against it - has been the biggest story in the world. And we in the media have found ourselves front and centre in the ongoing battle between Islamic extremists and those, like yourselves, who seek to counter them.

It's not a position we chose or that most of us are comfortable with. We journalists prize our objectivity, our supposed neutrality, although that in itself is subjective. We like to report from the sidelines, without taking sides, or being protagonists ourselves.

In the past that position was generally respected - by both sides, whatever the conflict. In the past having the word 'MEDIA' emblazoned on a vest or flak jacket, or plastered on the outside of your car, provided an element of protection. We thought of ourselves as sacrosanct, like the Red Cross. Those days are well and truly past. Now journalists are deliberately targeted.

In Iraq for example, 225 journalists and media assistants have been killed since the start of fighting there in March 2003. Another two are missing, and 14 have been kidnapped. (Figures from Reporters without Borders.) Increasingly, journalists have become a part of the story.

Before I go on, I'll tell you a little bit about my own work in this area, which started in 2002. You'll recall that was the year of the Bali bombings in Indonesia, in which 202 people were killed, including 88 Australians:

I work for a TV program called 4 Corners (slide 3) which airs on Australia's national broadcaster, the ABC. It's an investigative documentary-style program, and Australia's premier public affairs program - in prestige at least, if not in ratings. Starting in 2002 my colleagues and I compiled a series of stories on the Indonesian Islamist group, Jemaah Islamiyah, which was behind the Bali bombings. Our stories examined the formation and

evolution of JI, the role of its leader and co-founder Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, and the events leading to the bombings of those two nightclubs in Bali in October 2002, and subsequent attacks such as the bombing of the Marriott Hotel and the Australian embassy in Jakarta.

In 2004 I wrote book about JI (**slide 4**) called 'In the Shadow of Swords', which documented all of those events in much more detail

In the years since then my work has focused less on the phenomenon of terrorism and organisations like JI, and more on the stories of the individuals who have been caught up in the Islamist movement and the war on terror. They include people like:

- Jack Roche (**slide 5**), a British-born Australian Muslim convert, who joined JI in Sydney and was later seconded by JI's operations chief Hambali to al Qaeda and sent for training in Camp Faruq in Afghanistan. Roche eventually pleaded guilty to conspiring with al Qaeda leaders Abu Hafs al Masri and Saif el Adel to blow up the Israeli embassy in Canberra, for which he served four and a half years in jail.
- Jack Thomas (**slide 6**), another Australian convert who trained with al Qaeda and was asked to carry out terrorist attacks in Australia. Thomas went to trial in Melbourne last year; it was his second trial, and the primary evidence was an interview I had done with him on 4 Corners. He was ultimately acquitted of terrorism but convicted of a lesser charge.
- Mamdouh Habib (**slide 7**) is an Egyptian-born Australia who was arrested in Pakistan in 2001 after allegedly also training with al Qaeda. He was rendered by the CIA to Egypt, where he was detained and tortured for several months, then transferred to Guantanamo Bay, from where he was released without charge in 200x.

My most recent project is a book I have just finished writing about this woman (**slide 8**). She's an Australian born Muslim convert named Rabiah Hutchison, who Marc Sageman calls 'the matriarch of radical Islam' or 'the Elizabeth Taylor of the jihad'.

Rabiah is a fascinating character with an extraordinary story. She converted to Islam in Indonesia and joined the Islamist uprising against Suharto in the 1980s. She went on to become a teacher at Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's Ngruki school in Solo, Central Java, where she became very close to Ba'asyir and other leading JI figures.

Rabiah married an Indonesian named Abdul Rahim Ayub who became the *emir* of JI's *jemaah* in Australia. She later travelled to Pakistan with her six children in 1990 to join the jihad, and spent four years working in a mujahidin hospital and orphanage in the *tanzim* of the Afghan warlord, Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf.

In 2000 she travelled to Afghanistan where she worked closely with the Taliban and married a member of the al Qaeda shura, Mustafa Hamid, aka Abu Walid al Masri.

After 9/11, when the US and its allies attacked Afghanistan, Rabiah and her family spent several months on the run with other Taliban and al Qaeda fugitives. They eventually crossed the border into Iran, where they were detained under house arrest by the Revolutionary Guards, before finally being repatriated to Australia in 2003.

My book about Rabiah – titled ‘The Mother of Mohammed’ – from her *kuniyah* ‘Umm Mohammed’ – will be published in May.

Currently I’m working on a range of projects. I write for The Australian newspaper on terrorism, and am writing a chapter for a new American book which is being compiled by Bruce Hoffman, provisionally titled ‘Leader-led Jihad: Re-thinking the Global Terrorism Threat’. My chapter will be an Australian case study focusing on the 22 men arrested in Sydney and Melbourne in November 2005 (slide 9), who were charged with belonging to a terrorist organisation and conspiring to carry out an act of terror in Australia. Seven of those men have been convicted, while another five are currently on trial.

So, as you see I have my work cut out for me. (back to slide ‘The Media War’ 10)

In the course of that work, I have had many dealings with counter-terrorism police and intelligence agencies – in both Australia and other countries including Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Egypt, the United States and Afghanistan.

It is often a difficult and awkward relationship. (slide 11) I don’t need to tell you that intelligence agencies in particular have traditionally preferred to work well away from the public and media spotlight. They like to avoid public scrutiny. Their work is sensitive and by its nature much of it must be covert. In some instances publicity can imperil and undermine that work. And generally they don’t want the world to know when they venture onto the ‘the dark side’, in the memorable words of former US Vice President Dick Cheney.

Intelligence and counter-terrorism professionals frequently regard journalists as pests who don’t understand what they do and have no useful role to play in it. In some countries they have been known to murder journalists because of this, but thankfully Australia is not one of them.

The difficulties of dealing with and getting information from counter-terrorism and intelligence agencies is actually one of the reasons why journalists like me have focused instead on the stories of the accused terrorists – people like the ones I’ve mentioned. It’s easy to get access to them. They are willing to tell their stories. And that is partly why stories like theirs – the stories of people who claim to be victims of the war on terror, who claim that it is an unjust and illegitimate war, have gained such traction in the media.

I believe that the reluctance on the part of the counter-terrorism community to engage with the media and to engage in the very vigorous public debate about terrorism and how

it should be countered is a key reason why you – who claim to be the ‘good guys’ - are not winning the battle for hearts and minds..

In past conflicts, I think that the CT and intelligence agencies could afford to ignore the media and remain in the shadows, where they were comfortable. But in this conflict, I believe they can no longer afford to do so.

And this is because you are fighting an enemy which has made the media an absolutely central element of their campaign , an enemy that has set out from the very beginning to use the media to win the crucial battle for hearts and minds.

Here’s another quote from Ayman al Zawahiri, al Qaeda’s master strategist, in 2001: **(slide 12)**

‘We must get our message across to the masses of the nation and break the media siege.’

Al Qaeda’s media strategy was deliberate and targeted from the outset. You’ll recall bin Laden’s first television interview **(slide 13)** in May 1997 was with CNN. He followed it with interviews with BBC America, the respected British print journalist, Robert Fisk and of course there were numerous interviews with Pakistani journalists such as Rahumullah Yusufzai.

When bin Laden wanted to announce the formation of his World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders in 1998, he called a press conference at his al Badr camp in eastern Afghanistan, and put on a show for the journalists who attended, which included having his entourage of mujahidin fire AK47s and RPGs at the mountains.

More recently you’ll recall bin Laden’s videotaped ‘Message to America’, which was released for broadcast just before the US elections in 2004.

From its inception al Qaeda established a media committee **(slide 14)** to run its propaganda offensive, and its own media companies such as Al-Sahab, which films and distributes professionally produced videos, DVDs, and other forms of propaganda. This activity has escalated markedly since September 11. In 2006, for example, Al-Sahab released 58 videos, one every six days. In 2007 the number increased further. I’m afraid I don’t have the figures for subsequent years but I believe the trend has continued.

Al Qaeda also used the Al Jazeera TV network as a regular forum. The senior al Qaeda strategist Abu Walid al Masri – the man who married Australian woman Rabiah Hutchinson – was a correspondent for al Jazeera in Kandahar at the same time as he was a serving member of bin Laden’s shura.

The practice of communicating their message through the media is not unique to the current generation of Islamist terrorists. It’s a strategy that terrorists have always used.

‘Terrorism is about theatre’ said Brian Jenkins of the Rand Corporation. **(slide 15)**

Terrorism is ‘an extreme act of political communication’ said Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of MI6. (“)

People used to say ‘terrorists don’t want a lot of people dead – they want a lot of people watching’. That of course has changed – now they want both.

The British scholar and author Louise Richardson who is based at Harvard University examines this in her book ‘What Terrorists Want’. **(slide 16)**

What they want is what she calls ‘the three Rs’ – Revenge, Renown and Reaction.

The second of these – Renown – they gain through publicity, which she says has been ‘a central objective of terrorism’, serving to bring attention to the cause, and spread the fear instilled by terrorism.

LR cites an article by al Qaeda’s Abu Ubeid al-Qurashi, published in the group’s online magazine Al-Ansar.

Abu Ubeid wrote a commentary about media strategy in which he cited the Palestinian massacre of the Israeli Olympic team at the 1972 Munich Olympics. **(slide 17)** He wrote that this event was:

‘the greatest media victory, and the first true proclamation to the entire world of the first of the Palestinian resistance movements’.

This was the reason, he said:

‘Four-thousand journalists and radio personnel, and two thousand commentators and television technicians were there to cover the Olympic Games; suddenly they were broadcasting the suffering of the Palestinian people. Thus, 900 million people in 100 countries were witness to the operation by means of television screens.’

Abu Ubeid went on to observe that ‘The September 11 (operation) was an even greater propaganda coup. It may be said that it broke a record in propaganda dissemination.’

Al Qaeda and its allies have truly mastered this field. **(slide 18)**

They film and distribute motivational videos of their training camps set to rousing jihadist songs. They film their bombings, often using several different cameras strategically placed to capture the action. They film the testimonials of would-be suicide bombers, which are posted on the internet to inspire others. All of this is crucial to recruitment, mobilization, solidarity and morale.

They even use jihad as entertainment. You may have seen a program called ‘Hidden Camera Jihad’ which is a video compilation of attacks on US forces, set to a laughter

track. There is a video game – which showed up on Youtube a couple of years ago – called ‘The night of Bush capturing’, in which you get to shoot George Bush or Tony Blair.

Gordon Corra, a BBC journalist who wrote a book on the AQ Khan network has studied this media phenomenon – he calls it ‘the mainstreaming of jihad as entertainment’.

We have seen a similar trend in Indonesia, where Sidney Jones of the International Crisis Group reported last year, on the burgeoning publishing industry being run by JI and its affiliates. She described a network of printers, translators, designers, marketers and distributing agents, involved in a profitable and prolific industry. The magazines and books they produce are she says an ‘important vehicle for the dissemination of jihadi thought’.

One example is the book *Aku Melawan Terroris – ‘I Fight Terrorists’* – written by the Bali bomber, Imam Samudra, before his recent execution, which has sold 12,000 copies (more than my book).

The availability of and access to jihadist material – especially through the internet - has become not just a sidebar but a central feature in the evolution and spread of Islamist terrorism.

It has certainly emerged as a crucial factor in the formation of home-grown groups around the world, including the cells uncovered in Australia, which I have referred to.

Typically, these groups have no direct links to al Qaeda central, and are almost entirely reliant on material obtained over the Internet for their self-recruitment, ideology, spiritual guidance, and the facilitation of their plans, such as manufacturing explosives.

We know from evidence produced in the trial in Melbourne that this was certainly a characteristic of the group that formed around the Algerian-born cleric Abdul Nacer Benrbika (**slide 19**), who was convicted last year of leading a terrorist organization which intended carrying out a terrorist act in Australia.

This phenomenon has been examined by a Victoria Police CT specialist, Dr Joe Ilardi, who was the Victoria Police intelligence analyst in Operation Pendennis. He delivered a paper last week at another conference in Sydney, in which he expounded on this subject.

Quote: (slightly paraphrased) (**slide 20**)

‘The viewing, collection and dissemination of radical... literature and media is a feature common to all home-grown terrorists... The capacity to access this type of material, in particular that which provides so-called religious justification for violence, is of central importance in leading to the formation and affirmation of extremist views... Belonging to a jihadi group can instil in its members a sense of empowerment, control and purpose that

few experience outside this collective. This sense of power and purpose are reinforced by constant exposure to... extremist literature and media... The belief that one is performing God's work... a view routinely emphasised by this material, serves to elevate the individual's sense of confidence and self-worth.'

Dr Ilardi says that constant exposure to images of suffering Muslims - which are exploited so blatantly in the jihadist media - is central to what he calls 'the cognitive transformation' (**slide 21**) which takes place in an evolving terrorist.

'It instills a sense of outrage and creates a perception of crisis (which is) central to the thinking and motivation of jihadists, providing a reference and rallying point around which their new identity can crystallise... This perception of a common identity (with suffering Muslims) serves to create a bond which legitimises and inspires the individual's sense of enmity. An opinion that one is protecting victimised Muslims throughout the world can instil a feeling of exclusivity, elevating one's own sense of self-importance and purpose.'

Thus, says Dr Ilardi, this media material is 'instrumental in facilitating the individual's journey from unremarkable citizen, to someone who has internalised a belief system which makes violence a duty of the highest order.'

So, utilization of the media is at the forefront of the terrorists' campaign. And their success at this is a major factor in why the jihadist narrative has proven so enduringly potent for millions of Muslims, allowing the terrorists who rely on it to continue to flourish. (**The Media Battle**)

And yet for a range of reasons, the 'counter-terrorists' have been slow to recognise this and to seize the imperative themselves. Why is this? Part of the answer is the intelligence and counter-terrorism community's traditional preference for working behind the scenes. There are practical and logistical reasons which make secrecy critical at times. And there are long-standing suspicion and distrust between the media, on the one hand, and the intelligence establishment on the other.

There have been other setbacks which have helped the jihadists to gain the upper hand in the media war: (**slide 23**)

There were the disturbing pictures that emerged in 2004 of the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. There was the slow-burning scandal of Guantanamo Bay. There were the revelations about the CIA's rendition program and its secret prisons around the world. And the Bush administration's efforts to justify the use of torture against suspected terrorists.

These excesses in the 'war on terror' have been ruthlessly exploited by the jihadists. JI's leader Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, who is a skilled professional at using the media, launched a tirade from his prison cell at the time the Abu Ghraib scandal broke.

He condemned the US as ‘a barbarous nation which continuously desires to colonise and terrorise other nations. Their wealth and technological advances have been made the means by which to pressure, terrorise and make war on small, weak nations.’

Apart from providing grist for the mill of Ba’asyir and his fellow fanatics, those excesses have and have had a major impact on popular opinion both in the West and the Muslim world.

The news media’s take on the story has by and large been transformed. Seven or eight years ago the story – as we in the Western media saw it - was that evil religious fanatics were bent on destroying our governments and killing as many innocent civilians as possible in the process. The story has changed – ‘the war on terror’ is now frequently depicted in the media as an unjust and ill-executed war, which has undermined the very freedoms and values it was supposed to uphold.

The question for you to grapple with is – how do you counter this? I’m afraid I don’t have any precise answers for you, but in a broad sense, I believe that the intelligence and counter-terrorism communities must be pro-active in engaging with the media in that crucial battle for hearts and minds.

There are numerous examples of how this is being done:

- Embedding of journalists in conflicts like Iraq and Afghanistan. Most journalists love this – it gives them a chance to pretend they’re soldiers. However increasing resistance to it from some media outlets because they are so tightly controlled, get a one-sided sanitised story, often kept away from the real action.
- In some countries, intelligence agencies are taking a much more proactive role in public debate. Here in Australia, 20 years ago the public didn’t even know who the head of ASIO was. These days the head of ASIO is a well-known public figure who appears frequently in the media, answering questions and criticisms, and fronting up for the very lively debate we have been having in this country about CT policy.
- Some agencies have gone even further. The Australian Federal Police – which these days is principally a CT police force – has invited cameras in, for the making of a reality-TV style television series about cops at work, presumably part of the hearts and minds campaign. It remains to be seen how successful that will prove.
- Elsewhere intelligence agencies have opted simply for releasing more information via the media. An example of this was the statement by the MI5 head, Dame Eliza Manningham Butler, in 2006, when she announced that British authorities were dealing with 30 known terrorist plots, 200 terrorist networks, and were watching 1600 individuals who were ‘actively engaged in or facilitating terrorist acts here or overseas.’ It was clearly a strategic decision to take the media and the public into their confidence, releasing data that would normally be deemed classified, in order to persuade the public of how real the danger of terrorism is.

These are just same examples of how counter-terrorism authorities are engaging and perhaps winning some battles in the media war. No doubt you will know of other examples, perhaps in your own countries.

It's important to realize that journalists are not the enemy. They are not necessarily your friends either - but they are participants in this war, and you are better off having them on your side. I can assure you the media is absolutely open to any dealings with intelligence and counter-terrorism agencies. Journalists love those stories, and relish getting access to the people who have the kind of information they have.