

Islamic terrorism threat overrated, says professors claim in new book

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Arthur Conan Doyle invented Moriarty to give his hero, Sherlock Holmes, an opponent worthy of the efforts of the great, if equally imaginary, detective. The counterterrorism establishment has been similarly inclined — as have those responsible for producing such imaginative products as television's 24 and Homeland.

In general, however, the capacities of Islamist terrorists in the West, whether in Australia or abroad, are unimpressive, and any threat they present appears to be limited. The tragic attacks in Paris in November 2015 shows that the terrorist threat is real. However, there is a natural tendency to over-react to such events, and to massively inflate the capabilities of the perpetrators.

The Australian 2010 Counter-Terrorism White Paper frighteningly contends that terrorists are “a determined and capable adversary that has proved highly adaptive. They have the capacity to learn from their mistakes, adapt to counter-terrorism measures, and to regenerate. And they are innovative in their tactics and methods and have shown a dogged persistence in pursuing their goals, repeatedly following up failed attempts with successful attacks.”

In stark contrast, when seeking to describe their terrorist subjects, the authors of a set of 76 case studies of Islamist terrorists focused on the United States since 9/11 chiefly apply different descriptors: incompetent, ineffective, unintelligent, idiotic, ignorant, inadequate, unorganised, misguided, muddled, amateurish, dopey, unrealistic, moronic, foolish, and gullible.

The capabilities of actual or wannabe terrorists in Australia are also less than impressive. The perpetrator of the Martin Place Siege in 2014 wasn't organised enough to acquire an Islamic State flag, was labelled by his lawyer as “not very intelligent,” and by counsel assisting the coroner as “as a man spiralling downwards” and with “few friends.” Convicted terrorist Khaled Sharrouf, who left Australia to fight for Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, was characterised by Justice Whealy as “a very sad, pathetic figure. He remains a highly unintelligent man who has no perception of himself.”

The lack of success of Islamic terrorists in the West is impressive. Since 9/11, the number of people they have killed in the UK is, as for the US, less than four per year, while for Canada and Australia, it is two or three for the entire period. After 9/11, it was commonly held that such statistics had become irrelevant. Because al-Qaeda had proved so proficient on that tragic day, it was argued, the group would soon launch a huge variety of attacks and even fabricate nuclear

weapons. However, al-Qaeda, under siege, has done little since 9/11, especially in the developed world.

So what are the statistics? The annual fatality risks from terrorism of all kinds in the developed world are a thousand times lower than the current murder rate. The odds of being killed in a traffic accident are 4,000 times higher than perishing from a terrorist attack. For the US from 1970 through 2015 (which includes, of course, the 9/11 attacks), they are one in 4 million per year. For the period from 2002 through 2015, they are one in 90 million per year.

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