

# THE MUSLIM 'MARGINAL MAN'

Understanding the psychological and sociological state of Western Muslims will help integrate society and avoid terrorism, argues **Tanveer Ahmed**

**T**errorism has shone a light on Islam in the West. With many perpetrators of terrorist acts Muslims raised or educated in Western countries, their communities are under much greater scrutiny. After decades of multiculturalism there is doubt again about whether vastly different cultures and value systems can live side by side in respectful tolerance. Understanding why some individuals turn to terrorism and others do not is crucial to its prevention, and to the peaceful integration of Muslims into Western society.

## Turning to terrorists

Several of those responsible for the World Trade Center attack were raised and educated in the West. A French sociological study looked at the life of one of them, Moussaoui. He came to France as a young child and had a relatively normal upbringing in Paris's outer suburbs, where there are large numbers of Muslim immigrants. He was an average student in school and showed no signs of pathological behaviour. His first moves towards extremist Islam coincided with discrimination in the workplace and in leisure situations. In one incident a bouncer denied him entry into a Parisian nightclub, openly telling him it

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was because he was an Arab. Moussaoui's interest in Islam began soon afterwards, his brother told the French sociologists. The rest is history. The study went on to hypothesise that extremist Islam was only an option when being French no longer seemed a possibility.

The man who kidnapped *Wall Street Journal* journalist Daniel Pearl was born in Britain. He studied at a posh English public school and the London School of Economics—not known for its 'madrasah' qualities. His parents were Pakistani emigrants. Ahmed Omar Sheikh said he wasn't British, nor Pakistani, just a Muslim. He said he could never be accepted by the 'racist' British.

Though he never committed a terrorist act, the closest Australian parallel could be seen in the trial of the medical student Ihsan Al-Haque. He was accused of joining a banned terrorist group. He later said he had no idea that the organisation he joined, one committed to Kashmiri liberation, was banned and that he thought he was going to some kind of a camp. It seems strange that a young, intelligent man growing up in a Pakistani household in western Sydney, training as a doctor, would have any interest in Pakistani insurgents trying to claim Kashmir. While his apparent failure in his studies suggests frustration may have been a factor, it hardly explains a sudden desire for martyrdom. He even told his parents that he was 'sick of Westerners' before he left for Pakistan.

### The Australian 'Other'

Al-Haque was acquitted eventually, but his unfortunate case illustrates the difficulties children from Islamic households can have in reconciling their identities as both Australians and Muslims. Their parents, on the one hand, tend to teach collectivism, religious commitment and gender role differentiation. On the other hand, school and wider society espouse individualism, secularism and gender equality. The tension this arouses in children can lead to great psychological stress, criminal behaviour and, as shown in Al-Haque's case, increased inclination to recruitment by extremist groups.

A look at the sensitive issue of the gang rapes in Sydney reveals how these tensions can reveal themselves in criminal acts. Last year saw the appeal of Bilal Skaf, who led the group of Lebanese youth

involved in the gang rape of a Sydney teenager. Another gang rape involved a group of Pakistani brothers. The details of the rape and the sentences thereafter are not important for this discussion. While such instances do not show that Muslims are somehow more likely to commit rape, it is worth studying some similarities between the cases.

The most significant link between the two gang rapes was that the victim was perceived quite clearly as the 'Other', a racial and cultural inferior. One of the offenders amongst the Lebanese group called their victim an 'Aussie slut'. A psychological study of one of the Pakistani brothers, identified as MSK, suggests 'socio-cultural factors and family dynamics' played a considerable role in their views about Australian women, a key factor in the crime. In particular, the psychologist believed MSK felt Australian women were immoral and wanted sex.

MSK undertook an arranged marriage a few years earlier with a woman from his native Pakistan. He was only 20 years old at the time. The peculiar practice of arranged marriage is a rejection of the culture and practices of the adopted homeland, in this case Australia. While exact figures are difficult to find, it is particularly common among migrants from the subcontinent but also occurs among those of Arab and Asian backgrounds. It is an act of resistance to assimilation and a perceived cultural dissolution.

There is some element of a siege mentality. I know from my own experience within the Bangladeshi community that many new immigrants come believing they can build wealth and educate their children whilst at the same time shielding themselves from any Australian cultural influence, which they perceive as without morals. Arranged marriage is one such way they can shield themselves. MSK had been brought up in such a household, where the outside world of the West was perceived as 'the Other'. It would be no surprise if his sense of identity was a little warped.

### 'Marginal man'

Psychologists in Britain have studied Muslim youth raised in a similar context there, looking at Pakistani and Bangladeshi teenagers. Their findings have resonance here. In one study, it was found that many of the children led compartmentalised lives. Their views of themselves and their roles were

utterly separate when they were at home compared to when they were at school. For example, a child could go from prayer at a mosque with their parents and then meet their friends and drink alcohol at a local pub.

The sociologist Everett Stonequist invented the term 'marginal man' to explain the situation. While it sounds like an incomplete superhero, it referred to people caught up in the tussle between two distinctive cultural systems. His theory suggests that threats to identity may lead to higher levels of deviance, excessive anxiety and psychiatric instability. The 'marginal man' is the person who straddles two cultures in society. The marginal person may be rejected, and feel alienated, by one or both parents, by home or by school.

Second generation youth, particularly from Asia or the Middle East, are often encouraged by their parents to distance themselves from the dominant culture of the West, which the parents often perceive as immoral and hedonistic. At the same time, adolescents who return to their country of origin usually find they feel more alien there. They are confronted with inadequacies in language competency, historical knowledge and awareness of cultural and social assumptions of the idealised place of origin.

The British study concluded that this kind of marginal, compartmentalised life is often difficult to maintain, for the role-conflict can threaten a sense of 'ego-identity'. In lay terms, they cannot carry their inconsistent selves through to adulthood. It cites some cases of second-generation youth undergoing what they called a 'fundamental change' in their late teens or early 20s as some kind of resolution. This often involves a dramatic shift to either side of the cultural divide, perhaps committing to an arranged marriage or seeking refuge in deep religiosity. Or it can occur in the opposite behaviour, such as eloping with a partner against their parents' wishes.

### Parental expectations

This cultural pressure is often exacerbated by the enormous expectations surrounding children growing up in such environments, being streamed from childhood to enter the most lucrative and demanding fields.

Only last December British police announced that the suicide rate for South Asian women in the

UK aged 16-24 was three times higher than the national average. The announcement coincided with investigations into 122 British honour killings over the past decade, a horrific manifestation of the fear of assimilation.

There are no equivalent figures in Australia, but I can speak of a case I have seen that fits into this category. A young Egyptian woman presented to me suicidal last year after she felt there was no way to keep her parents happy and still live an independent life. It was precipitated after her father removed her from a school dance, which she attended without his approval. She stayed at home for the next three

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months, except for school. Her father had told her that she had 'dishonoured' him.

I also remember the 2003 suicide of a 21 year old Bangladeshi girl, Shohana Islam, whose body washed up on a Melbourne beach. She was a university student whose parents had recently visited Bangladesh in order to find her a husband. It emerged she was waiting to meet an Australian boyfriend on the day of her death. He did not come. In newspaper reports, it is interesting that while Miss Islam remained missing, the father's message to her was that 'we are not angry', suggesting there was conflict regarding her choices in love. Whilst Miss Islam did not turn to religion, her case illustrates some of the difficulties in juggling disparate identities.

More recently, the murderer of Dutch film director Theo Van Gogh, Mohammed Bouyeri, is a classic example of a young educated man turning to Islam after feeling disappointed about his home country. Brought up in Holland and trained as a social worker, Bouyeri turned to extremist groups after he was declined subsidies from the Dutch government. This was further complicated by the

### Australian Attitudes Toward Muslims

Tanveer Ahmed's article notes that many Muslims do not feel fully accepted by Australian society. But what do we know about the wider society's attitudes toward Muslims? Unfortunately, our pollsters have not been very interested in this question but a couple have asked relevant questions.

Table 1 contains the results of two Saulwick Polls, conducted in the months prior to the 2001 and 2004 elections, and published in *The Age*. The 2001 poll was carried out in August, just prior to the September 11 attacks. It found that just over a third of respondents wanted to exclude immigrants from some part of the world. They were asked to specify which parts. They could give more than one response, so the totals exceed 100.

Even prior to September 11, the Middle East was the least popular source of immigrants, nominated by 34% (equivalent to about 12% of the total sample). However Muslims in particular were singled out by only 7%. In 2004, a lower proportion of people, 30%, wanted to keep out any particular groups of immigrants. However, among that minority, both people from the Middle East (40%) and Muslims in particular (10%) were more unpopular compared to 2001. Overall, though, the events since August 2001 have had no dramatically negative effect on attitudes towards migration to Australia by Muslims.

The best polls for measuring attitudes toward ethnic and religious minorities are social distance surveys. Table 2, from the 1988 Issues in Multicultural Australia survey, gives an example. It grades social distance from very low (welcome as family member) to very high (keep out of Australia). I have added the first two and last two categories to count people with low social distance and high social distance. Of the groups in the survey—British, Aboriginal, Greek, Asian and Muslim—the people in the sample felt most distant from Muslims.

On this limited evidence, Muslims are considerably less popular than other social groups, and have been at least since the 1980s. However, only a minority believe Muslims should be excluded from migrating to Australia. In the Saulwick Poll it is hard to tell to whether some of the general categories are polite ways of expressing anti-Muslim feeling. The constituency against Muslim migration is probably somewhere between 15 and 25% of the population.

Andrew Norton

**Table 1: Migration to Australia, 2001, 2004**

<i>Q: Should Australia accept immigrants from any part of the world, or exclude immigrants from some parts of the world?</i>	2001	2004
Accept immigrants from anywhere	64	66
Exclude immigrants from some parts	36	30

  

<i>Q: Who should be excluded as immigrants?</i>	2001	2004
People perceived to be a threat or potential burden	30	22
People perceived to be resistant to assimilation	14	10
People of the Islamic faith	7	10
People from countries that show religious or political intolerance	6	4
People from the Middle East	34	40
People from Asia	28	17
People from the Indian subcontinent	6	6
People from the Balkans	5	0
People from Europe	4	3

Source: Saulwick Poll August 2001, July 2004

**Table 2: Social distance survey, 1988**

<i>Q: How close are you prepared to be with Muslim people?</i>			
Welcome as family member	8.8	Allow as Australian citizen	14.8
Welcome as close friend	14.9	Have as visitor only	16.5
<b>High acceptance (family/friend)</b>	<b>23.7</b>	Keep out of Australia altogether	15.3
Have as next door neighbour	16	<b>Low tolerance (visitor/keep out)</b>	<b>31.8</b>
Welcome as workmate	11.9		

Source: Issues in Multicultural Australia 1988

sudden death of his mother. An article in *The New Yorker* (10 January 2005) wrote of Bouyeri:

Perhaps it was his mother's death, or perhaps it was the series of setbacks and disappointments he encountered; in any event, Mohammed became unhinged... Once a model pupil, apparently well adjusted to Dutch society, (he) became a holy warrior.

It is within this context the concept of 'identity Islam' emerges. The simultaneous alienation from Western cultural traditions and the culture of their parents can encourage the embrace of what they perceive as a culture-free, global Islamic militancy.

### Identity Islam

What begins as an assertion of identity can develop into ideological action. This is what we term political Islam. It has its roots in the 1970s as a new form of internationalist Islamic ideology, combining political ambitions, anti-colonialism and conservative religious revivalism. Its modern version is centred on a deep hatred of the United States and a shared sense of victimhood, uniting Palestinians with repressed Muslims in southern Thailand.

Part of political Islam's prestige stems from the fact it is often the only oppositional voice raised against repressive regimes in the Islamic world. This is partly because the lack of a free press or the right to protest means the mosque is often the only place to discuss politics.

But political Islam appears to take on a new life in the West. The rejection of culture is central to this movement. This is partly due to the fact that its participants often felt alienated from any culture, native or adopted. An ideological premise of internationalist identity Islam is that 'true' Islam is apparently floating above everything cultural. It is pristine and unassailable. There is a belief, contrary to any historical fact, that during the birth of Islam in the sixth and seventh centuries, a utopian state had been established where everyone was happy and honest. This state of affairs, the thinking goes, should be re-imposed on humanity today.

The internationalist Muslim revivalist movements such as Jamaat Islami, referred to as Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia, have

encouraged this concept of a 'cultureless' Islam. The revivalists often dominate Islamic gatherings due to their commitment, pre-existing networks and defined ideological agenda. Muslim elders often welcome such elements because it helps them to resist the immediate threat of assimilation into Western culture, by keeping the youth 'Muslim and proud of it.'

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The American sociologist Marcia Hermansen studied Muslim youth organisations in university campuses around the US. She wrote of the attraction of such an ideology:

One can often imagine the problems of Muslim youth, often isolated by having distinctive names, physical appearance, and being associated with a stigmatized culture and religion. No wonder the concept that they were actually the superior ones, fending off the corrupt and evil society around them, rang pleasant.

Nor do the practices have to be Western to be rejected. I attended an Eid prayer to commemorate the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting, and heard a cleric tell the largely South Asian audience to never wear saris again. This was an 'heretical innovation', he proclaimed.

Identity Islam is sustained by a sense of moral superiority and Muslim cheerleading. It is not an intellectual critique of alternatives but rather a rejection of the 'Other', namely the West. Instead it creates a de-cultured, rule-based space where one asserts Muslim 'difference' based on gender segregation, romantic recreations of the past and apologetic articulations of Islam. Despite often having high quality education, its members become skilled at interpreting away key verses in the Koran explicitly allowing things like domestic violence or polygamy. Of course, Muslims are not the only people skilled at creative interpretation.

Allegiance to the tribe is all important. Like any tribe, membership comes with its own rituals, symbols and actions. It is nowhere rooted in historical fact, for wherever Islamic civilisation took root around the world, it acculturated at the same time it Islamicised. The idea of a 'culture free' Islam is therefore derived from modern ideologies rather than from authentic practice.

### Terrorist tribes

But when does identity Islam becomes terrorism?

Very rarely. The vast majority of Muslim youth fall somewhere between extreme interpretations of identity Islam and a complete adoption of Western practices. Some flee from their Muslim background,

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while others like Irshad Manji, author of *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform In Her Faith*, are progressive activists. Most are moderate, struggling to balance their varying allegiances. Furthermore, religious zeal tends to dissipate with age as career and family demands take over.

Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist who worked for the CIA, refers to the groups that may commit acts of terrorism as 'Bunches of Guys'. In his book *Understanding Terror Networks* he concentrates on these loose tribes of young men who go one step further and bind each other to secret membership and a mutual commitment to acts of violence.

In another setting, similar groups of men might brawl at soccer matches or rob banks. In terror cells, the kinship and friendship networks combine with images of violence against Muslims, such as in Palestine, Kashmir, and more recently southern Thailand, to encourage a deepening faith in the ideology of identity Islam. It is then they are vulnerable to access by the better resourced members of what we term Al-Qaeda.

Sageman argues that poverty, religious belief and frustration are 'necessary but not sufficient' to explain how a few angry young Muslim men—but not many, many others—decide to embrace jihadist violence. The social bonds of tribal membership, central to asserting a strong identity, are more important. When these groups unite with al-Qaeda leaders or trainers, the danger of terrorist violence heightens.

Sageman argues that Al-Qaeda is more reliant on such cells since it lost its Afghan sanctuary. He cites the Moroccans who carried out the Casablanca hotel bombings in 2002 as an example. They planned their attacks in local caves and forests. They were aided by advice from senior al-Qaeda trainers trained in Afghanistan. The Madrid bombings are another example.

Sageman also offers policy advice on how to stop terrorism. From his days working as a spy recruiter, he notes that the tight group loyalty amongst Islamic radicals makes it very hard to lure informers or agents. This is the major reason why Western intelligence has been so poor regarding previous terrorist acts. But he believes that the best luck is to be had from Bunches Of Guys who trained for jihad but didn't act. The Australian case of Al-Haque probably falls into this category.

The Al-Qaeda Sageman writes of is more movement than organisation, an 'imagined community', in the phrase of anthropologist Benedict Anderson. Its symbolism holds attraction for those seeking a universal dimension to their self-image, and can easily fit with the perceived purity of identity Islam.

### Avoiding alienation

Australia faces less serious problems than its Western counterparts. Our migration policy of attracting skilled migrants has resulted in a far better integration of our Islamic communities. There are no equivalents of the outer Parisian ghettos of North African immigrants or the South Asian communities in Britain who have a five times higher rate of incarceration than their white counterparts.

But the problem of identity Islam remains and will continue to present difficulties. The French intellectual Tariq Ramadan argues Muslims in the West need to find a 'Third Way' where they combine the elements that Islam has in common with Western philosophies. He believes European

Muslims can have their cake and eat it too, it seems, arguing that democracy is consistent with Islamic values. He says it is most important to break down the 'us versus them' mentality within Islamic communities.

Ramadan also believes Western leaders should encourage greater understanding via promoting an 'inclusive memory'—recognising the commonalities and overlap between Muslim philosophy and Western philosophy—so that Muslims 'feel part of' and invested in 'the present.' His immense popularity in France and Europe suggest there is huge demand for voices advocating such synthesis.

Ramadan's critics, however, suggest that he advocates ambivalence and only exacerbates the confusion amongst Muslims in the West. They contend that there are many situations where loyalty to Islam conflicts with the values of their adopted homelands. If their religion states they are to be Muslims first, where can this Third Way of Ramadan be?

Muslims experience doubt about Australian society's attitudes towards them, as well as about their own view of Australian society. In my own experience, I think many Muslims' sensitivities are currently heightened to any kind of criticism. It is not unlike the radical Jews who see any criticism of Israel as tantamount to anti-Semitism. A recent report from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission showed Muslims, especially women, felt they had experienced much greater racism in recent years in all aspects of their life. This ranged from uncomfortable looks to violence.

A real challenge is persuading young Australian Muslims that there is meaning in being Australian as well as Muslim. School counsellors can play a key role and their education on such matters is paramount, noting the deep psychological conflict Muslim youth may experience. Whilst research into their impact on multicultural communities is limited, their potential in preventing the psychological deterioration of children is well known. However, the needs of Islamic communities are unique and it is unclear if current training methods for school counselors are sufficient. In Britain, a number of social workers speak of their isolation and an inability to grasp the complexities of some of their South Asian clients. The outsider status of many Australian health professionals suggest there is a

strong role for Islamic communities themselves to conduct their own programmes in identifying and helping troubled children and adolescents. A mentor programme is a possible example.

Islamic schools will remain controversial. The needs of minority groups do need to be addressed, but I suspect the curricula of Islamic schools needs closer monitoring. This is especially true with regards to the reluctance of Islamic schools to teach any kind of sex or drug education and their attitude to evolution as just another theory to sit alongside Koranic creation stories.

Moderate imams also need to be encouraged, for the vast majority of the current group tend toward the extreme. They are often imported from the Middle East and have little interest or knowledge in Australian affairs. One approach, currently being tested by France, is to set up local training schools for imams.

A greater public voice is all-important in making minorities feel included. Moderate Islamic voices need to be fostered and supported. One such way to do this could be to sponsor academic speeches on university campuses. This will also encourage a greater acceptance of diversity within Islamic communities. Like Christians and Jews, there are many Muslims who do not live piously but still see their Muslim background as important. These 'cultural' Muslims need to be legitimised as a middle ground between assimilationists and rejectionists.

Australian Islamic communities have improved their public voice in the past few years, with a greater number of community groups working for a more positive image of Islam and greater voice for Muslims. Muslim commentators such as Amin Saikal and Waleed Aly appear regularly in the media. But their presence in popular Australian culture is still non-existent. Where are the Muslims in *Neighbours*?

The growing difficulty of identity Islam and its tribal, oppositional nature needs to be recognised and confronted. Unless channelled into more constructive directions, the energies and aspirations of Muslim youth, both in Australia and abroad, may be spent in the pursuit and reinforcement of a brittle tribalism that will not withstand the test of time.

Furthermore, the dubious affiliations of this tribalism will continue to be the fuel for future acts of terrorism.