

# Fortress outlook no answer

**F**ear is its own confirmation.

September 11, Tampa and the Bali bombing have shown Australians that the rest of the world is a hostile place. The emotional response is to retreat to Fortress Australia and guard against alien intrusion.

One month after Bali we have enough information to begin to assess the threat, challenge the fear and respond constructively.

Al Qaeda looms large because of the scale and unpredictability of its atrocities, its global reach and its ability to conflate in western eyes with the whole of Islam. In fact, the reassuring thing is not the strength of the terrorist threat but its weakness.

Patient forensic investigation of September 11 and the Bali bombing are revealing these bloody feats to have been masterpieces of improvisation by a small organization of limited resources. Al Qaeda and its associates look to be thin networks of small cells of dedicated amateurs.

Members of these cells cultivate local respectability and enjoy the ideological encouragement and patronage of a few influential clerics, such as Abu Bakar Bashir. In a parallel universe they might have been animal liberationists or train-spotter clubs.

What makes these cells so dangerous is the high quality of global coordination, strategic targeting and timing provided by a few key, peripatetic terrorists such as Hambali. But the term "Islamic terrorism" is complete nonsense.

As previously experienced in Algeria, Egypt, Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and now Indonesia, this

terror is directed as much against Muslims and their society and government as against westerners. Al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah and their equivalents are like fleas trying to hijack the elephant.

They do not belong to Islam but are parasites on Islam. In their ideological fervour and rejection of normal society, they are best compared with extreme revolutionaries like Lenin and the Bolsheviks in pre-1917 Europe.

Extreme revolutionaries can seize control of a nation only after a complete political and economic breakdown that destroys the regime and any viable alternative to it.

In the 1990s, Indonesia was a good target for destabilization. After the downfall of President Soeharto in 1998, Jemaah Islamiyah appears to have instigated a wave of bombings of mosques and churches with the intent of causing religious strife.

It succeeded only in remote eastern Indonesia but has undermined confidence in the government and economy. The revolutionaries are therefore much more of a threat to the peace, stability and future prosperity of Indonesia than they are to Australia.

Indonesian governments have had to contend with sporadic unrest in favour of an Islamic state since 1950. The Jemaah Islamiyah movement is a current manifestation.

An Australian response that portrays Indonesia as a national threat and arms against it would play right into the hands of the terrorists. Nor would it be sensible to restore military aid to the Indonesian armed forces to serve as a bulwark of national security. The Indonesian Army is still a violent, predatory and destabilising force with no commitment to the emergence of a healthy civil society.

Instead, Australia's response to the

challenge of terrorism should observe three basic principles. The first is peaceful and respectful engagement with the Islamic world. Terrorism is our common enemy.

The second is closer regional cooperation. Australia has irritated its neighbours by a clumsy combination of arrogance and indifference. In recent months progress has been made against terrorism through cooperation between Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, the US and Australia. Indonesia is now involved, and hopefully soon, Thailand.

Third, Australia must renew its damaged relationship with Indonesia. Our long-term security depends fundamentally upon the political and economic development of Indonesia. We have an enlightened self-interest in helping Indonesia to overcome its massive problems.

The Australian Government would do well to make a long-term pledge of 0.5 per cent of GDP to assist Indonesia's development. The cost of such an investment in our common future would be offset by savings on defence and homeland security. In these ways we can apply our values, resources and ingenuity to defeat terrorism and the fear it induces by peaceful means. Fortress Australia is morally and tactically indefensible.

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