

The Australian media and terrorism “expert” Dr Rohan Gunaratna

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Ever since the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the “terrorist expert” has become a ubiquitous presence in the international media. Various academics and authors have risen to prominence on the basis of their alleged high-level intelligence connections and access to information about the plans and activities of terrorist organisations.

One of these is Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, routinely described as a “terrorist expert” and “leading authority” on Al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism. He has been interviewed and quoted by media outlets around the world, including the BBC, CNN, and the *New York Times*.

Gunaratna has an especially high profile in Australia, where he is invariably quoted whenever a favourable opinion is sought, or new evidence needed, for the Australian government’s participation in the “war against terror”.

But a review of his background and credentials raises significant questions about his reliability and “expertise”.

Gunaratna, 42, was born and educated in Sri Lanka. Between 1984 and 1994 he worked in the office of the Science Adviser to the Sri Lankan President, whilst also doing research and consultancy work for the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development.

Gunaratna’s term with the Sri Lankan government coincided with its war of repression against the Tamil people. During the 1980s and 90s he wrote six books and numerous articles on the political crisis in that country, drawing extensively on his links with the government and intelligence services. From the outset of his career, he made no secret of his support for the war and his opposition to the Tamil struggle and the LTTE, which he labelled a terrorist group. In the late 1990s he made a series of bizarre allegations against the separatist organisation.

In 1997, Gunaratna claimed that the LTTE had developed a new body suit that was specifically designed for suicide bombings. The new suit, he declared in an article published by the *Scotland on Sunday*, ensured that the terrorist’s head would survive the explosion, becoming a “lethal projectile—sometimes travelling as far as two hundred yards”. No evidence was provided, and in the ensuing six years nothing more has been heard of the deadly suit.

In 2000, Gunaratna alleged that LTTE ships had been sighted in Australian waters and that Australian Tamils were exporting “mini-helicopters” to Sri Lanka for attacks on government troops. His claims, which again were made without evidence, were condemned at the time and have since been quietly dropped.

These problems did nothing to harm Gunaratna’s academic career. After gaining a masters degree at Notre Dame University, he went on to complete his doctorate at Scotland’s St. Andrews University, and was appointed research fellow at the university’s Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence.

It was in the course of investigating the LTTE’s foreign support base that Gunaratna began to extend his brief to international Islamic terrorism. His first written contribution to the field, entitled “Blowback,” was published by *Jane’s Intelligence Review* in July 2001. Co-authored with

three other academics, the article gave an overview of the development of Al Qaeda in the context of the US embassy bombings in Africa.

Dr. Gunaratna had already made several appearances in the Australian media in connection with Sri Lanka and the LTTE prior to September 11, 2001. But after the terrorist attacks he was immediately elevated to the status of a world authority on Al Qaeda and all aspects of international terrorism. That his credentials rested on a single, co-authored article, following a dubious record on Sri Lankan affairs, was never mentioned.

Just two weeks after the terror attacks, Gunaratna appeared on SBS’s *Dateline* program, immediately attributing the atrocities to Al Qaeda and bin Laden and lending his full support to the Bush administration’s open-ended “war on terror”. Arguing for an immediate invasion of Afghanistan, he also warned that “excessive” civil liberties would enable terrorists, whom he alleged were residing in Australia, to attack the population.

Gunaratna’s stance was particularly useful for the Australian government, which was using the terror attacks to bolster its position in the 2001 federal election campaign. Prime Minister John Howard was the first government leader to give unconditional support to the Bush administration, and to commit troops to the illegal invasion of Afghanistan. In the name of fighting terrorism, he also announced plans to introduce a vast array of anti-democratic measures.

On September 27, 2001, Gunaratna was quoted in the *Australian* as saying that there were seven terrorist groups operating in Australia. “These are terrorist groups who have killed many women and children and these groups are functioning here,” he warned, without advancing any evidence.

On the same day, the Melbourne *Age* reported Gunaratna’s thoughts on democratic rights. “Your laws, the legal system is very weak in responding to this type of terrorist support network”. Elsewhere, he claimed that Germany had become the European base for Al Qaeda because of its “tight limits on how intelligence and police officials can gather evidence against suspects, a strong civil liberties tradition and easy access to education and welfare provisions”.

In October 2001, Gunaratna complained to the *Herald-Sun* that Howard’s repressive legislation was being delayed because of terrorist influence over Australian politicians. “The reason your politicians are not passing this legislation is because some of these [terrorist] groups are lobbying your MPs and telling them we will give you so many hundred votes from this migrant community and you must help us and raise our concerns in parliament,” he said.

The following month, the *Review*, journal of the Australia-Israel Jewish Affairs Council, published an interview with Gunaratna in which he stepped up his attacks on opponents of Howard’s anti-terror laws. “I also have a special message for the politicians especially of Australia, some of these terrorist organisations exercise constituent or electoral pressure and you must not succumb to this pressure. A terrorist group can come and tell you, look we will give you 10,000 or 20,000 votes in the next election. You should include this in your manifesto or you should air this in your

parliament. It will be highly counterproductive for political leaders to succumb to this kind of pressure because this will damage the security, not only of your country, but international security in general.”

In December 2001, Gunaratna embellished his claims about terrorist groups in Australia by stating that they operated “through front, cover and sympathetic organisations [which] may take the face of human rights and humanitarian groups as well as community organisations”. Again there was no evidence. Nor did he name any of these human rights or humanitarian groups that were allegedly operating as terrorist fronts.

By December 10, 2001, the number of terrorist groups Gunaratna claimed were active in Australia had risen from seven to eight, although he offered no explanation as to how or when the additional, unnamed organisation had set up shop in the three months since September.

Despite the inconsistencies and fantastic character of his allegations, Gunaratna’s musings, which dovetailed neatly with the government’s agenda, continued to be reported uncritically.

Gunaratna’s unstinting support for the US, British and Australian governments’ foreign policy objectives was well rewarded. His contacts in US intelligence and counter-terrorist circles grew and his writings were published in several foreign policy and international security journals. But the biggest coup took place in June 2002: the publication of his book *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, by Columbia University Press. Promoted heavily in the media, it went on to become a best seller around the world.

Inside Al Qaeda received universal media acclaim. “A remarkable new study,” enthused the *Times* (London), “Excellent,” declared Peter Bergen from the *Washington Post*, while Thomas Powers, in the *New York Review of Books*, called it “a careful and methodical account” that “does the work of many tomes”.

But it was not long before several of the book’s claims were vigorously challenged. The Malaysian government attacked the book’s assertions of links between the ruling Barisan Nasional party and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) of the Philippines, and through the MILF to Al Qaeda—and threatened legal action. Interviewed on Singapore television about the controversy, Gunaratna backtracked, changing his allegation to a link “between MILF operatives and a *few individuals* in the Barisan parties” [emphasis added].

In one of the book’s more sensational accounts, Gunaratna described in detail an Al Qaeda plot to hijack a British Airways plane on September 11, 2001, and crash it into the houses of parliament. Only the grounding of all aircraft after the bombing of the World Trade Centre supposedly prevented the London attack.

The source was an alleged Al Qaeda member, Mohammed Afroz, who had been arrested in Bombay, India in October 2001. Afroz had also allegedly claimed he had planned to fly a plane into Melbourne’s Rialto Towers. After his release by an Indian court in April 2002, New Delhi police declared the claims to be a fabrication by the Bombay police force. An investigation by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation into the alleged Melbourne plan assessed it “to be lacking in credibility.”

Inside Al Qaeda also fudged the record of its author. The book claimed he was “principal investigator of the United Nations’ Terrorism Prevention Branch”, and that after the September 11 attacks, he “was called to address the United Nations, the US Congress and the Australian Parliament”.

After the *Sunday Age* conducted an investigation into his biographical details, Gunaratna apparently admitted that there was, in fact, no such position as “principal investigator” at the UN’s Terrorism Prevention Branch, and that he simply “worked there in 2001-02 as a research consultant.” According to the July 20 article in the *Sunday Age*, “He also confirmed that, rather than directly addressing the UN, Congress, and the Australian Parliament, he had actually spoken at a seminar organised by the parliamentary library, given evidence to a congressional hearing on

terrorism and delivered a research paper to a conference on terrorism organised by the UN’s Department for Disarmament Affairs.”

So concerned was the British publisher of *Inside Al Qaeda* about possible legal repercussions arising out of the unreliability of its assertions, that it published an extraordinary disclaimer under the heading “Publisher’s note” advising the reader to treat the book’s contents as mere “suggestions”.

“A wide range of organisations—banks, governmental and non-governmental bodies, financial enterprises, religious and educational institutions, commercial entities, transport companies and charitable bodies are referred to in this book as having had contact or dealings with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Unless such references specifically state otherwise, they should be treated as nothing other than a suggestion that the organisations concerned were the unwitting tools of those who attempted, successfully or otherwise, to infiltrate, use or manipulate them for terrorist purposes.”

The terrorist attack on the Indonesian island of Bali on October 12, 2002, saw the media renew its love affair with Gunaratna. Again lining up directly with the US and Australian governments, Gunaratna immediately declared an alleged Islamic fundamentalist entity, Jemaah Islamiya (JI) to be responsible and went on to make a series of unsubstantiated claims that JI was preparing attacks in Australia and that the organisation had operational cells inside the country.

In the Australian edition of *Inside Al Qaeda*, Gunaratna claimed that the alleged JI leader and organiser of the Bali bombings, Hambali, had visited Australia a dozen times. Even the Australian government was forced to admit that repeated checks inside Australia and overseas had failed to turn up any evidence of such visits. Nevertheless, Gunaratna’s claims served their intended purpose: to raise public fears and anxiety over possible terrorist attacks and help create the necessary climate for the passage of Howard’s anti-terror laws.

Most recently Gunaratna has backed the Australian government’s support for the illegal incarceration of Australian “enemy combatant” David Hicks at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and his trial before a military tribunal in the US.

Just months ago, in March, Gunaratna stated unequivocally that David Hicks was “not a member of Al Qaeda.” Hicks “never intended to attack a civilian target and he was not trained to attack a civilian target, and nowhere have we found any information that suggests [otherwise],” he declared.

On July 7 he made a 180-degree turn. Immediately following the US announcement that Hicks would be one of six Guantanamo Bay prisoners to be tried in a secret military court as a terrorist, Gunaratna was on hand to justify the illegal move. Hicks, he now asserted, had been “groomed for terror missions” in Al Qaeda training camps. “The fact he received training should be viewed seriously because a person does not receive that level of training unless both he and his trainers had some special plans for him,” he insisted.

This was, once again, especially helpful for the Howard government, which backed the US action, refusing to accede to widespread demands for Hicks’ repatriation, on the grounds that he had “trained with Al Qaeda.”

So long as Gunaratna’s allegations help legitimise the Australia government’s support for Bush’s “war on terror”—and the illegal and criminal acts being carried out under its auspices—the media appears to be entirely indifferent as to their relationship to reality.



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