

This is a war ‘of terror’, not ‘on terror’

An interview on Australia’s “terrorist” arrests

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The following is an interview with FS, after a letter to the WSWs last week about the arrest of Izhar ul-Haque, a 21-year-old student, charged with undertaking training with an alleged terrorist organisation. If convicted, he faces 25 years’ imprisonment. A week after the young man’s arrest, Khalid Lodhi, a 34-year-old architect, was also detained under the Howard government’s draconian anti-terrorist laws. Lodhi was charged, among other things, with recruiting ul-Haque for terrorist activity, and could be jailed for life. All the evidence points to the two arrests being a witchhunt by the government for its own immediate political purposes, with leading cabinet ministers publicly insinuating that ul-Haque and Lodhi were involved in a major “terror cell” planning an atrocity in Australia (See: Australia’s first “terrorist” charges: timed for Howard’s election campaign).

Izhar ul-Haque and his supporters are currently preparing a Supreme Court application to overturn a magistrate’s refusal to release him on bail to prepare his defence, despite the Australian Federal Police conceding that the young man was not suspected of planning any terrorist act. Early last year, ul-Haque allegedly attended a 20-day course in Pakistan conducted by Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), a group fighting Indian rule in Kashmir. It was not until last December, 10 months later, that the Australian government proscribed LeT as a terrorist organisation. The police case against Izhar ul-Haque appears to rest strongly on notes that he recorded in a diary while undertaking the LeT course. Ul-Haque made no effort to hide the notes—they were found in his luggage when he returned to Australia. FS’s son is a fellow student, and friend, of Izhar ul-Haque.

Why do you feel so strongly about Izhar’s arrest?

Izhar is an intelligent, decent and socially open and engaging person, who has friends from all walks of life. I consider that he is an extraordinary young man who will make a great contribution to our society.

Izhar attended a 20-day course in January-February last year. I’m a bit sketchy on the details of the LeT training. But I do know that the images shown on TV of masked people training with guns were not correct. The environment was much like a university or school where prayer and philosophy are explored. Yet, this government and the Federal Police have told me, and would have everyone believe, that he is a threat to our society. I do not believe that; I know that not to be true.

This whole experience of watching one of our son’s friends being treated so harshly and being labelled a terrorist has been very unnerving for me and my family, particularly my son. At the end of the day, I don’t feel threatened by anyone other than this government.

Izhar is in the middle of a political nightmare. Not only is the government eager—in this election year—to have someone charged with being a terrorist in Australia to justify its illegal, ill-advised and unpopular

war on Iraq and support its “war on terror”. ASIO (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) and the AFP (Australian Federal Police) are also fighting for more power and money. Izhar’s arrest and conviction will make a lot of people happy.

I don’t think that this war on terror has been well thought out. This government’s unconditional support for Bush and his policy and our active role in the US-led war on terror have compromised Australia. I don’t think there has been enough debate—intelligent debate—on the “war on terror”.

With these aggressive policies, particularly in attacking impoverished countries, it is hardly surprising that people have become angry, watching their fellow countrymen hurt and killed. Australia is one of the aggressors, rather than doing something intelligent about the situation. At no point did this government come up with any alternative other than going to war. I find it horrendous.

What they did to Izhar reminded me that you cannot keep your eye off the ball. I am a housewife raising a family, paying a mortgage and doing the usual things that people do. We can’t keep our eye on every piece of legislation. While I have been sceptical about the invasion of Iraq and concerned about the terrorist laws, I have not been following them judiciously. It certainly never occurred to me that one of my son’s friends could be locked up under the legislation.

When I actually started reading the legislation, I realised that it blurred the lines in determining when you could be deemed a “terrorist”. It reminds me of the days of McCarthy, with “reds under the beds,” in that, by association you could be deemed a ‘terrorist’. Now the Attorney-General, Philip Ruddock, wants to expand the powers of ASIO and the AFP. This environment of fear is very dangerous. We are being terrorised more by this government than by anyone else. I have reached a point where, after 12 years in which I have not been politically active, I have to do something more than be angry with this government.

You have obviously come to know Izhar well. Do you have a sense of what he has been going through? How was he affected by the anti-Islamic atmosphere whipped up after the September 11 attacks?

I have come to know him and he has been a guest in our home. More than that, my son tells me, and I trust my son’s judgment, I know Izhar is surrounded by decent people. He and his friends are subject to the same pressures as all of us, but he is a good kid. His friends believe without a doubt that the police have got the wrong person. When they first saw his picture in the newspapers, they thought he had won a science award.

He is very diligent at note-taking. I almost laughed that he kept a diary during his LeT course. He was used to attending courses and taking notes of everything that was said. It was well-known among his friends that if you wanted to get notes from a lecture, Izhar took good notes. The interesting thing about the learning exercise for him was that he decided,

while he was in Pakistan doing the course, that it was not for him. He made definite decisions on what his boundaries were, and they certainly did not extend to performing terrorist acts, and he made that very clear to a number of people, including the police when they questioned him.

What drove Izhar to attend the course was complex. Partly it was concern for the Muslims in Kashmir, partly frustration with the racist behaviour of Australian patients (during his medical degree) to his background. He is a Pakistani. He wrote a letter to his family about his frustration. He'd become disillusioned. However, after completing the 20-day course with LeT, he decided not to proceed. He returned to Australia and has been excelling at university.

As a mother of a 21-year-old I am painfully aware that the process of becoming a man includes exploration of politics, values, etc. In searching for meaning, most people explore environments and groups that might not always be a good choice.

There is no doubt in my mind that post-September 11 and the subsequent war on terror, there is an underlying targetting of Muslims. There is a political agenda there, regarding the Arab world, which has never been discussed openly. You can imagine the impact on this intelligent young man, with so much potential, who every day was being looked at, as he said, like a frog. He said people did not want to talk to him.

What do you think of the treatment he is receiving in Goulburn prison, where he is being held in a maximum security isolation cell?

It's like using a nuclear bomb to swat a fly. His treatment is unnecessarily harsh. Given that the AFP has admitted that he was not planning a terrorist attack, and has admitted that he is not a terrorist, he should be out on bail. He deserves the right to defend these charges. He is a young, vulnerable man who has been caught up in a political witchhunt and he should be around people who support and believe in him. He deserves every chance possible to clear his name.

The only time he has human contact is at meal times. There is no doubt he is getting depressed. He has been labelled a terrorist. He may be convicted on a technicality, because those accused don't have to have criminal intent and they can be convicted on circumstantial evidence. I believe he will eventually be acquitted, but not before he has been dragged through the political mud, and used to extract every political mile that this government can achieve.

From the moment he was arrested—within hours—the Attorney-General (Philip Ruddock) and Alexander Downer (Foreign Minister), and even (Prime Minister) John Howard, were politically positioning themselves, saying it was wonderful what the intelligence agencies were doing. They were sending out the message to all Australians: "We are protecting you."

I don't feel protected at all. I feel very scared. When the government starts locking up our sons—people who are the future of the country—I start questioning their motives. When they target Muslims, and at the same time, tear up our civil liberties, they had better be careful. I am going to do everything I can to get the facts and truth out in the open.

I understand that you phoned the AFP and the Attorney-General's Department to register your opposition. What was their response?

At the Attorney-General's Department, I asked one of the national security advisers whether, with the broadness of the anti-terrorist laws, my son could protest against Izhar's arrest without being labelled a terrorist himself. She said: "As long as it is a legal protest".

If someone can be arrested for attending a low-level training course, I am afraid that my son can be arrested simply for being a friend of Izhar. I asked her how far we could go if we were critical of what was happening. She said: "Well, you have to be very careful."

I got the general impression that the government has no idea of Izhar, except that he is a Muslim terrorist and a danger to our community. They are not prepared for any other explanation.

When I spoke to the AFP, they were smooth talking. But when I asked

one of the counter-intelligence managers whether he considered Izhar to be a threat to the community, he said: "Well, you don't have to be a direct threat." In other words, the law applies very broadly.

The response to this case is important. Students and a whole layer of people, including Izhar's former school principal, attended his court hearing and signed a petition to support him, indicating a considerable degree of resistance to what is happening. Do you have any comment?

I have no doubt that the support will grow. This is just the beginning—those at the court were just those people prepared to stand up publicly. This is another sign of the poor quality of official intelligence! I don't think the government realised how well-liked this kid is. He is intelligent and charming, and people can see his potential.

But just imagine if Izhar was a shy person, who did not have the same circles of contacts.

Look at the quantity and quality of people coming forward. They are saying: "We will put our reputations on the line for this kid, and no matter what happens we will never believe that he is a terrorist, and we will get him out of jail." But it will be an uphill battle. We are still in a state of shock ourselves, not knowing how much we can do without being accused of being terrorists ourselves.

Because there's no one in opposition, with both the Labor and Liberal parties crumbling on human rights issues, I guess people are still in shock, asking what do you do? There is no doubt we have to galvanise people.

Willie Brigitte, a French man who met Khalid Lodhi and was deported last year on visa charges, is being used by the government to tie these cases together. Much of the prosecution case against Lodhi depends on confessions that Brigitte is alleged to have made under subsequent interrogation in France, where he is being held without trial on unspecified terrorist charges. What do you know about Brigitte's treatment in detention in France?

He was initially held naked for three days and sleep-deprived. His lawyers have documented this. It sounds like the French authorities have got him to the point where he will say whatever they want. Given the recent photos of prisoners being abused in Iraq, I believe that the French have been interrogating him mercilessly.

Some of the information that he is supposed to have given the authorities is highly questionable. I don't know much about Brigitte personally, but after Izhar's arrest I have questioned every single thing that the authorities have done. I have seen it with different eyes and I have come up with big holes in their story. When I looked at the facts in Brigitte's case and his questioning for days and weeks, it struck me as bizarre. Why has the Howard government allowed the French to interrogate him and then acted on spurious allegations via the French authorities?

Khalid Lodhi is meant to be a terrorist and yet he was sharing the material he got off the Internet with his work mates. There is something wrong here. Australians have not responded enthusiastically to the government's dial-up terrorist phone line, so the government may be using Lodhi's case to make us all paranoid.

The Labor Party welcomed the arrests of Izhar ul-Haque and Khalid Lodhi. What is your response?

That is a huge disappointment. There is not a lot of difference between Labor and Liberal on these issues. Howard has been able to use September 11 and the Bali bombings to strike fear into people's hearts, and then say, I am here to protect you.

There has not been enough tough questioning of Howard, even by the media. We all talk about the "war on terror" when we should be talking about the "war of terror" because that's what it is. It is time we started challenging the language and the premises on which this war is based. In the meantime, who's addressing the poverty around the world and mending the fractured relationships this war of terror has caused?



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