

Jihad stirs in Australia's suburbs

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Alienated youths are attracted to the sense of purpose offered by terrorism

GLADSTONE Park hardly seems the stuff of nightmares.

This is blue-collar Australia, where six out of 10 locals are Aussie-born and fall into the nation's inverting age pyramid, where the nuclear family dominates, and where most people work as tradies or labourers, or in shops.

The suburb in Melbourne's northwest is struggle town. Families earn maybe A\$100 (\$125) below the national median income and most are battling to pay the mortgage. Almost half are Catholics, at least nominally.

But last week Yacqub Khayre, a 22-year-old Somali-born Australian citizen from Gladstone Park, who had fallen off the rails in his teens, put his home on a different map. Rounded up before the winter sun roused Melbourne, he appeared in court accused with four others of planning martyrdom, slaughtering fellow Australians by machine gun in the name of Allah until himself cut down.

The plot as described by police was brutally simple. Influenced by the al-Shabaab organisation waging war to bring Somalia under a Taleban-style fundamentalist regime, Khayre and his colleagues intended to charge into Sydney's Holsworthy army barracks, killing everyone they could.

They would probably have shot their way in successfully. Entry to the base is guarded by unarmed civilian staff and fairly easy to enter, as a reporter and photographer from Sydney's Daily Telegraph demonstrated this week by gaining access and wandering around for 40 minutes before being stopped and arrested.

How far they would have got is less certain. Holsworthy is a front-line base, home to an SAS counter-terrorism unit and paratroopers and commandos attached to the army's special forces command.

The allegations against Khayre are far from proved, and other accusations of violent Islamic extremism have failed in Australian courts. But the skeleton of the case outlined by police after the massive pre-dawn swoop across Melbourne's north reveals the sum of Australian fears: terrorism born spontaneously in the nation's suburbs.

If the prosecution proves its case, Khayre and his four co-accused will be textbook examples of home-grown terrorism, young men isolated on the fringes of migrant struggletown and seduced by the global vision of radical jihadist ideology.

Khayre's story has been unveiled to the nation by police, friends and family. His family came to Australia in 1991 after Somalia disintegrated into the civil war depicted graphically in the movie *Black Hawk Down*, sponsored by his uncle, Ibrahim Khayre.

Jacqub was only 3 when he arrived with his four siblings. Most of his childhood was unremarkable: by all accounts a happy, disciplined boy who did well at school.

But at age 12 life soured. His grandfather, a pivotal influence in his life, died, and Khayre began hanging

with friends his family considered bad influences.

He stole his uncle Ibrahim's car, moved out of home and, according to the police, fell under the sway of radicals meeting at the 8 Blacks community centre and mosque.

Police allege that through a Somali "facilitator", Khayre returned to Somalia and trained with al-Shabaab, by then waging a ferocious war that has won them much of southern Somalia, over which they have imposed strict sharia law.

Although focused on its own national struggle, al-Shabaab (the young ones) has become a magnet for foreign recruits and Islamic extremism, and has forged links with al Qaeda, espousing an ideology of global jihad.

Khayre was not the first Australian to take the radical road to Somalia - one has been killed there - and it was frustration among his Somali- and Lebanese-Australian colleagues at their inability to travel to Africa that allegedly spurred the decision to take violent action at home.

If the allegations are true, this is an alarming development for Australia. The Somali community is both shocked by the claims, and angry at the finger that has been pointed at them by association. It fears a backlash, as has happened to other migrant communities in the past.

It is disturbing in a broader sense because of growing international concern at al-Shabaab and the potential for Somalia to become the next great haven for international terrorism, as Afghanistan was under Taleban rule.

Fears of a new terrorism epicentre have been growing since a young American Somali, Shirwa Ahmed, died in a suicide bombing last year.

Investigators now believe that as many as 40 other youths from the same area of Minneapolis-St Paul may have followed him to Africa.

And darkest of all is the potential for angry young men to turn from suburban life to violent extremism, often without warning.

Analysts say the nature of terrorism in the West is rapidly changing, shifting from the university-educated 20-something radicals of the past to blue-collar youths of limited education and prospects, often migrant children or second- or third-generation citizens of the countries they attack.

Research by Sam Mullins, a PhD candidate at Wollongong University's Centre for Transnational Crime Prevention, reports that 41 per cent of 373 terrorists charged, convicted or killed in Europe and North America between 1990 and 2004 were Western nationals.

Writing in the Terrorism Research Initiative publication Perspectives on Terrorism, Mullins says the traditional view of young men being radicalised by firebrand clerics is also changing. More cells now erupt spontaneously, with only the most tenuous links to organised terror groups.

Influenced by, and working through, the internet, they are very hard to detect.

"The new factors of virulent anti-Westernism, strategic transnationalism, and now home-grown radicalisation have decentralised the threat, introducing deep uncertainties into the equation," Paul O'Sullivan, former head of the Australian Secret Intelligence Organisation, told a risk management conference.

ASIO has warned that a "small but significant" minority of Australians hold extremist views, with an even smaller minority prepared to support them with acts of violence, logistic or propaganda support, or by travelling overseas to train or join jihad campaigns.

The most serious threats to mainland Australia have already come from within, from radical Muslim converts like ``Jihad Jack" Roche, who met Osama bin Laden and planned to bomb the Israeli embassy in Canberra, or extremists such as Abdul Nacer Benbrika, the spiritual leader of cells planning attacks in Melbourne and Sydney.

Rohan Gunaratna, head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism at Singapore's Nanyang University, has estimated that as much as 80 per cent of Australia's counter-terrorism resources now target homegrown terrorism.

Research has shown that alienated youths are attracted to the sense of purpose it offers. Australia is countering the extremists with a broad range of measures, most working with Muslim communities and targeting the causes of anger and alienation.

``We must not get to the point where we blame the Somali community or we blame the broader Islamic community because that actually works against what we're trying to achieve here, which is to de-radicalise the small number of men who want to go down that path," Victorian police Chief Commissioner Simon Overton told Radio 3AW.

``We just need everyone to stay calm and work together and keep Victoria the safe and cohesive community it is. The broader Somali community are not terrorists, they do not support terrorism. They are peaceful people and we need to work hard to continue to include them in our Australian community."

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