New Zealand is fortunate in having remained untouched by extremist Islam. The few incidents that suggested a degree of conflict between majority culture and Islam, or Muslims’ interpretation of it, have not escalated into violence or provoked an atmosphere of dangerous antagonism. Yet, a concern with national security cannot remain completely oblivious to some fundamental questions. Globalisation has not occurred to the exclusion of the internationalisation of radical ideas and extreme methodologies that may be entailed. Some surely have the capacity to disturb even the tranquillity of New Zealand.

What are the dangerous trends in contemporary Islam that make it a suspect ideology in the West to which it feels compelled to respond with vigilance and by waging the ‘war on terrorism’? While participating to some extent in the sharing of intelligence, New Zealand, under the previous government, has stood somewhat aside from this US-led initiative.¹ It chose not to participate in the Iraq invasion and its military contribution in Afghanistan is now under a UN mandate. Its function there is mainly in the area of peaceful reconstruction. While the events of 9/11 had caused shock and empathy with the US, and New Zealand, in a modest way, followed its lead in Afghanistan—not unwillingly, as the Taleban regime appeared thoroughly repulsive to public sentiment—further American actions provoked scepticism. On the whole, among the Muslims I interviewed the (previous) government’s reluctance to embrace American leadership (of the Bush administration) in global politics, widely perceived as anti-Islamic, was

¹ At the time of writing, the very recent change in government in November 2008 allows for no prediction as to the country’s future political course in this matter. The previous Labour-led coalition had a somewhat distant relationship with the USA, which was not completely shared by the conservative opposition that has now formed a coalition-government. Not much later the USA also had a profound change in administration.
appreciated and much welcomed. As a sweeping generalisation, this has given New Zealand some credit in the eyes of Muslims. Yet the question does emerge: what are the ideas and actions emanating from radical Islam that may pose a danger to New Zealand’s communal wellbeing?

Before beginning to consider this question, it is appropriate to quote the words—only slightly altered to eliminate speech idiosyncrasies—of an Arab Muslim, a leading personality in his local religious community in New Zealand. A highly educated and thoughtful man, he was visibly annoyed at the prejudice he believed he had encountered. Clearly, the ‘vibes’ he thought he was receiving from the wider society were hurting his sensibilities. ‘Why are New Zealanders always suspicious of us Muslims’, he wondered, sadness and irritation clearly imprinted on his face. ‘No Muslim has committed murder or violence, or vandalism in this country. We are all very law abiding, minding our own business. Look who is violent, who commits murders. Nine out of ten times it is Maori or Pacific islanders, but no one says “we don’t want them here, because they are violent and they commit murder”. It seems to me the whole of New Zealand society is violent; it is geared towards violence. Their idea of good fun is to vandalise something or bash someone. It’s all to do with physical prowess that is so valued here, so revered. Rugby, sports, everything that is physical, that takes strength and endurance. They glorify war on ANZAC day. We Muslims do no one any harm.’

It was significant that in demonstrations protesting the Danish cartoons, when Muslim temper was at boiling point, placards carried by the demonstrators did not demand the killing of those responsible. Demonstrations in Auckland and elsewhere were characteristically peaceful and devoid of flamboyant, homicidal demands. This was quite a contrast to demonstrations in European centres if the pictorial evidence circulated on the internet is to be believed. In London, for instance, demonstrators apparently carried homemade placards with demands such as ‘butcher enemies of Islam’, ‘behead those who

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2 The predictive, sweeping quality of this comment was unfortunately diminished by an attempt at hijacking an airplane by a Somali Muslim woman in February 2008. In the course of this failed crime, three people were injured. The perpetrator was reported to have mental health issues (see e.g. *New Zealand Listener*, 23 February 2008: 28). There are other crimes and misdemeanours committed by Muslim immigrants. But statistically there are no data about Muslims committing offences since offenders’ religion is not recorded.