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# Melbourne's Petite, Shy, Honours-Student Terrorist

**A**petite, pretty twenty-four-year-old Bangladeshi named Momena Shoma arrived in Melbourne on February 1, 2018, to study linguistics on an excellence scholarship at La Trobe University. Describing herself as “an introvert and very shy in nature”, she spoke of an ambition to become a university instructor. Coming from an affluent and secular Dhaka family which considered her “brilliant”, Momena had been an A student at some of the capital’s elite English-language educational institutions: Loreto School, Mastermind School and North South University (NSU). She graduated from NSU with an honours degree in English language and literature in 2016, then enrolled for a master’s degree at NSU before switching to La Trobe.

Like many newly-arrived foreign students, Momena turned to the Australian Homestay Network (AHN), “Australia’s largest and leading homestay provider”, to find a family with which to board. She quickly settled in a home in Bundoora, near the university.

What could be more innocent? Anyone worrying about her being dangerous because of her Muslim faith would have been called out for racism, chauvinism, xenophobia, bigotry and (that most dreadful of accusations) “Islamophobia”. That she wore a burka (the black full-body Islamic covering) only made such suspicions the more heinous.

But, as Momena took a twenty-five-centimetre kitchen knife to her Bundoora room and repeatedly stabbed her bed, she signalled the danger to come. In the words of a magistrate, “She did the practice run on the mattress with the first family that hosted her and they felt intimidated enough to go to [AHN], saying, ‘We’re scared, we don’t want her to continue living with us.’” Out she went, facing homelessness.

Responding to her urgent need for accommodation, the Singaravelu family—husband and night-shift nurse Roger (fifty-six), wife Maha (forty-five) and daughter Shayla (five)—welcomed Momena

into their four-bedroom house in the suburb of Mill Park on February 7 for a few days until she found more permanent lodgings. Maha explained her motive in accepting Momena: “I felt for her, being in a foreign country. I put myself in her shoes and her parents’ shoes.”

Themselves immigrants from Malaysia, the Singaravelus had come to Australia thirty years ago, Roger explained, “to seek opportunity”. They had hosted foreign students since 2014 in a spirit of multiculturalism, of giving back, and of teaching tolerance to their daughter. A neighbour, Neil Fitzroy, described the Singaravelus as engaging and open, taking in foreign students to give them “an Australian experience”.

Matters started well enough with Momena, Maha recalls: “She was very pleasant to deal with. She even offered to babysit our daughter if we ever went out.” Roger concurs: “Shoma gave a good impression right up before the attack.” He found her “well mannered” and noted that she spoke better English than he did.

Growing up in Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country, Roger tells me, he and Maha “understand the norms that are embraced by Muslims”. But AHN had not told the family that Momena wore a burka, and her appearance, Roger recounts, “gave us a shock when she first arrived at our doorstep”. That she “was constantly lifting the burka during meal times” to get food into her mouth made the family feel “uncomfortable having meals together”. Much less did AHN tell the couple about Momena having been thrown out of her previous homestay due to her practice at stabbing. And no one knew she had stolen the knife from the first homestay host.

**O**n February 9, after two days with the Singaravelus, Momena struck. At 4.25 p.m., with Maha out of the house and Roger napping on a mattress in the lounge with his child in his arms, Momena, wearing her burka, used her stolen knife

to stab her host in the neck. But the under-five-foot woman lacked the strength to cut the much larger Roger's jugular vein, getting the knife only superficially into his neck—enough to make him bleed “like a fountain” but not enough to do him fatal damage.

In his words: “I thought I was dreaming as I felt a sharp pain on my neck. I woke up and started screaming.” He tried to pull the knife out as Momena leaned over him and pushed it in, yelling all the while, “Allahu Akbar!” He noted that “her eyes were so intense”. Roger continues:

I reactively grabbed onto the knife and fought [her] off ... I was pleading with her for a good four, four and a half minutes and said, “Please let go [of the knife], Shoma. Please let go. We will talk.” All she [kept] saying was “Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar,” while my daughter was screaming here, and I told my daughter, “Run, Shayla, run.”

Finally, Roger prevailed and pulled the blade out. After that, he says:

I managed to grab hold of my five-year-old daughter out of the house and rang Mustafa Osmanoski from my mobile, and he came to my aid immediately. When I managed to open the garage door, the neighbour across the road came to help me too.

Mustafa, seventy-six, a retired security guard of Macedonian origins, and his wife Safia, watched over a sullen and immobile Momena for twenty minutes as she awaited arrest, slumped against the wall of the room where her attack had taken place. The neighbours recount her saying that “It was a mission and that she had to do what she had to do.”

To the police, she calmly elaborated that she had come to Australia not to study but to kill “in the name of God”. She expected that a knife stab to the neck “would be fatal”. Seeing herself as a foot soldier of Islamic State (ISIS), Momena had planned the attack; indeed, before leaving Dhaka, she had told her younger sister Asmaul Husna, twenty-two, of her murderous plan.

Momena had put herself in a jihadi mood that morning by watching a gruesome fifty-five-minute ISIS video from 2014, *Flames of War*. The ABC paraphrased her testimony:

Watching the videos made her feel like a loser, she said, because she thought she wouldn't be able to commit the violent jihad portrayed in the films. She told police she was commanded

to kill by Islamic State. “I felt obligated, and it was like a burden on me,” she said. She said she felt relieved after the attack because she had tried. “In front of Allah I just can tell him that I tried, that's it.”

Her motive? Momena acknowledged bearing no personal grudge against Roger (who had spoken barely fifty words to her) but attacked him out of a sense of duty to “trigger the West”: meaning, to spur non-Muslims to attack Muslims, possibly leading to the chaos that brings on the End of Days. She explained:

I had to do it ... it could have been anyone, it's not specifically him. He just seemed like a very easy target since he was sleeping, so yeah, and I had to push myself. I wouldn't even hurt a rat. This, I just felt like if I don't do it I will be sinful, I will be punished by Allah.

Charged with attempted murder and one count of engaging in an act of terrorism, Momena proudly and defiantly presented herself in the magistrate's court in August, wearing a niqab, as an ISIS soldier. She refused to stand for the magistrate or to enter a plea.

At the Victorian Supreme Court in September, the judge compelled her to take off the niqab and show her face to establish her identity as she made her plea. This time, Momena pleaded guilty to engaging intentionally in a terrorist act “with the intention of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause, namely violent jihad”. (The attempted murder charge was dropped.)

Her sentencing will take place in January; the maximum penalty is life in prison. An online poll asked if she should be deported or incarcerated: after running for several weeks, the vote was overwhelmingly (84 to 16 per cent) in favour of deportation.

Roger suffered cuts to his shoulder, severed tendons in his hand, and a ruptured vertebra in the neck. He recovered after surgery for injuries to his shoulder and neck. Testifying in April, he described the attack's “devastating effects” on his family. Shayla was traumatised by what she witnessed: “She continues to experience nightmares and flashbacks, and requires psychological treatment. She still sees blood on the wall and asks me to clean it off, although there is nothing there.”

Roger suffers too: “I was very close to death and I find building trust is not easy. I have become a recluse now and always sensitive to my surroundings following the incident. People with burkas

tend to aggravate my condition.” He now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To compound these problems, Roger is going without pay and may soon be fired from the hospital. As he writes:

I have not been able to return back to work following the incident and currently on leave without pay. The nature of my work involves treating psychiatric patients. The trauma that I have had to endure has affected me to the extent that I feel very vulnerable in such a setting. I am still having ongoing treatment with my psychiatrist for PTSD and he has certified me unfit to return to work. Work has been placing pressure on my employment status. I guess when one has limitation such as mine, employers have no patience to wait for recover from trauma. I am currently on leave without pay and at the verge of being terminated as I am not able to return to work at this stage.

It is outrageous that Melbourne Health, Roger’s employer and a major teaching hospital, has treated him so shabbily. Public and political pressure needs to be exerted on Melbourne Health to grant Roger the time he needs to recover fully and return to work.

In sum, as Roger explained in a recent letter, all his and Maha’s hopes “have been shattered by this act of cruelty! Our lives have not been the same and will never return to normal.”

**I**n Australia, Momena’s assault appeared to be a case of “sudden jihad syndrome”, coming without warning from a budding linguistic scholar. But subsequent investigations in Bangladesh found that many warning signs had been missed through bravura incompetence.

By all accounts, Momena fitted into the normal Muslim life of her elite family. Her father, Mohammad Moniruzzaman, a chartered accountant, is senior vice-president and a board member of Janata Insurance. Her uncle, Mohammed Abdul Aziz, is dean of the Faculty of Science at the University of Dhaka.

She withdrew into a world defined by Islam only in 2012, her first year at NSU. No more music or movies for her; she demanded her family get rid of its television set and nagged women to cover themselves. Paraphrasing an Australian police report, the ABC found that Momena “felt like a prisoner in her own house”, being the only family member to have become a Salafi Muslim. “She began following online preachers, including notorious Yemeni

preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, and looking at Islamic State videos.”

The women’s prayer room at NSU, an institution deeply associated with Islamism, became a central focus of her life. For example, jihadis linked to the murder of a secular blogger attended NSU, as did those who attacked a restaurant that left twenty-nine dead and even one who attempted to blow up the Federal Reserve Bank in New York.

At the height of Islamic State’s notoriety in 2014, Momena applied for a student visa for travel to Turkey to take up a scholarship from Ankara’s Atilim University, but probably really intending to join ISIS. However, the Turkish consulate in Dhaka turned her down, as it did about half the Bangladeshi student applicants. Momena may also have tried, unsuccessfully, to obtain visas for Tunisia and the United States.

A Bangladeshi police report found that Momena’s sister Asmaul Husna also became radicalised after their mother’s death from diabetes in June 2015; the sisters took to watching Al Qaeda and ISIS videos together. “Both sisters got inspired to devote [themselves] to jihad and vowed to fight for establishing an Islamic caliphate in Bangladesh.” They joined a faction of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), an ISIS-linked jihadi group with a violent record dating back to 2005 (when it announced itself with 350 explosions in one hour) and culminating with the attack, mentioned above, killing twenty-nine in a restaurant.

Momena was in contact with many Bangladeshi jihadis, both local and fighting for ISIS in Syria. The latter included A.T.M. Tajuddin and Gazi Sohan. Sohan, also an ISIS recruiter until his arrest in 2015, met Najibullah Ansari, a Bangladeshi marine engineer and JMB member, in an online chat room and introduced him to Momena in 2014. Momena and Najibullah hit it off and quickly planned to marry but did not due to family opposition. Soon after, Najibullah announced in January 2015 (in a Facebook message to his younger brother) that he was “going to Iraq to join ISIS”, though it appears he actually went to Syria. Najibullah’s father filed a report with the Chittagong police in 2015, informing them of his son’s travels.

Bangladeshi police also found evidence (on Momena’s smartphone and computer) pointing to an important jihadi connection in Australia: an unnamed female friend from an Islamic discussion group at NSU; the two of them together communicated with Gazi Sohan. The female friend married a Bangladeshi resident in Australia and moved there after graduation in 2016. They stayed in steady contact on WhatsApp, inciting each other with jihadi videos. The friend apparently persuaded Momena



to join her in Australia, leading to Momena's enrolling at La Trobe. The friend visited Dhaka in December 2017, where the two rejoined their old Islamic discussion group at NSU. The friend left for Australia on January 20 and Momena followed her on February 1. It is not clear if they met in Australia.

Bangladesh's Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime unit (CTTC) believes it possible that Momena knew other ISIS recruits: "We had detained many radicalised students in 2014. Momena maybe had contact with some of them. We are investigating this matter closely." The police did find large numbers of WhatsApp and other communications with fellow Islamists, suggesting that Momena was integral to a jihadi network. It is remarkable that these many signs should all have been missed.

**B**angladeshi ineptitude reached new heights when, three days after Momena's attack on February 9, a Dhaka Metropolitan Police team from the CTTC went to the Shoma family home at the Royal Aroma Garden apartment building to investigate. Moniruzzaman co-operated during the two-hour inquiry. But Momena's sister Asmaul Husna (also known as Sumona), who also attended elite English-language schools, was "very rough" in her attitude. Then, the CTTC reports: "when the police officers were leaving, Sumona surprisingly launched a knife attack, shouting Allahu Akbar. She also said, 'You are Kafirs [infidels]. We must establish the rule of Islam in the country. We must do jihad if necessary.'" A press account says she added, "I will kill [Bangladeshi Prime Minister] Sheikh Hasina, I will kill [Syrian President Bashar] Assad. They are all infidels. One day everyone will join jihad and Islam will rule the world."

The injured policeman was taken to the hospital and quickly released. The CTTC subsequently found that, before departing for Melbourne, Momena had ordered her sister to murder a policeman and instructed her on the use of a knife. Due to her JMB membership, Asmaul Husna was charged with terrorism. One would have expected a counter-terrorism team to be a little better prepared for trouble from a potential jihadi.

Within three days, then, the two sisters, both inspired by Islamic motives, had stabbed two victims in two countries. In the light of Momena's

eventual guilty plea, the denial on the part of her family stands out. Her uncle asked, "How can she be involved in militancy after only eight days in Australia? We cannot picture her holding a knife. She is not aggressive or cruel person. No way she can be part of terrorism. We are Muslim, but we are not terrorists or extremists." He recently refused to reply to my question whether, after she pleaded guilty, he still maintains Momena's innocence.

**"H**ow the hell did she get here?" Roger rightly asked of Momena Shoma after the assault. Her case raises troubling questions about the competence of institutions tasked with keeping the public safe from petite, pretty, graduate student jihadis.

Why were the Bangladeshi authorities oblivious to Momena despite her extensive ties to the country's jihadi network?

Why did North South University not oppose the jihadi culture and network it hosts?

Why, after Najibullah Ansari's father alerted the Chittagong police in 2015 to his son's joining ISIS, were the son's associates, including Momena, not investigated?

Why did the Australian authorities allow Momena into the country after the government of Turkey (and perhaps those of Tunisia and the United States) had rejected her visa application?

The intrusive and "most dreaded" Australian Form 80, required of all applicants for permanent residence and some for temporary residence, asks, "Have you ever been refused a visa to any country?" and "Have

you ... ever been associated with an organisation engaged in violence or engaged in acts of violence (including ... terrorism)?" What value have these questions?

Given Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh's thirteen-year history of murderous activity, why did Australian security authorities not list it as a terrorist group until June 2018, four months after Momena's attack?

Did fears of being called "Islamophobic" cause the Australian Homestay Network not to inform the police or the Singaravelus about Momena's having stabbed her bed?

Why did the Bangladeshi police not take proper protective steps when they questioned Asmaul Husna?

In these matters failure characterised

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*The case of Momena Shoma crystallises the need for Australia and other Western countries to develop fair but rigorous mechanisms to exclude Islamists from their countries.*

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institutions ranging from universities and homestay networks to local and counter-terrorism police. Worse, my correspondence with the Bangladeshi government suggests it has learned nothing from this fiasco.

The case of Momena Shoma crystallises the need for Australia and other Western countries to develop fair but rigorous mechanisms to exclude Islamists from their countries. Note: Islamists, not Muslims. Yes, distinguishing the one from the other is a challenge, but, given adequate time, skill and funds, it can be done. A number of Australian politicians have endorsed this approach, including Tony Abbott, Bob Carr, Peter Costello, Scott Morrison, Brendan Nelson and Alby Schultz. Carr was notably specific:

I don't think [Islamists] should be let in ... If someone has a record of saying everything your country stands for is wrong—women should have no rights; homosexuals should be hunted down and persecuted; sharia law should be applied from go to whoa—I don't think they have a role here. I don't think they can be integrated here.

As the petite honours student in linguistics demonstrated, even the most innocuous-looking Muslim can go jihadi to “trigger the West”.

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## Broad Arrow Café

Broad Arrow Café was busy that day,  
the tables were arranged tightly to heel—  
two minutes of terrible shadow play.

A Colt AR-15 Carbine at bay,  
Martin Bryant went in and ate a meal.  
Broad Arrow Café was busy that day.

*That's not funny*, someone heard someone say,  
not realising the shots were too real,  
two minutes of terrible shadow play.

A reenactment, or Port Arthur play?  
Customers trapped, with no place to conceal,  
Broad Arrow Café was busy that day.

Twenty-nine rounds fired in the café,  
ten people wounded and twelve people killed,  
two minutes of terrible shadow play.

Families could not comprehend the affray,  
crouched in corners, they covered and kneeled.  
Broad Arrow Café was busy that day,  
two minutes of terrible shadow play.

*Joe Dolce*