

**EVOLUTION OF TERRORISM – AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR
AUSTRALIA**

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Recent events have placed terrorism on the front pages, providing a reminder in all its graphic horror of the violence that individuals following an Islamist extremist ideology, including Australians, are willing to undertake.

Terrorist bombings, shootings and other attacks designed to strike fear into and cause mass casualties among innocent civilians are occurring on a weekly basis around the world, in Syria and Iraq, in Nigeria and Kenya, Mali, Somalia, the Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines... the list goes on. Nothing that I have seen in my five years as Director-General of Security has led me to think that the threat of terrorism, and particularly Islamist extremist terrorism, is – and will remain - anything but real and persistent, both globally and within Australia itself.

It is ASIO's task to detect terrorist planning, assess its significance and the gravity and immediacy of the threat and to advise the government accordingly. Working with law enforcement throughout Australia, our policy has always been to try to nip terrorist planning in the bud, before it gets to the point where detonators are set or assault weapons cocked, and to use the courts as our ultimate disruption.

The old cliché remains valid: “to discover and stop attacks we have to be right every time, the terrorists only have to be right once”¹ It is an onerous responsibility.

For ASIO, terrorism is defined in the ASIO Act of 1979 as

“...acts or threats of violence or unlawful harm that are intended or likely to achieve a political objective, whether in Australia or elsewhere, including acts or threats carried on for the purpose of influencing the policy or acts of a government, whether in Australia or elsewhere..ⁱ

This definition, which covers politically, ideologically or religiously motivated terrorist attacks, rightly includes consideration of violence outside of Australia as an intrinsic part

of the threat posed. Terrorist attacks undertaken outside of Australia – particularly those undertaken in Indonesia – have directly affected Australians – over 100 Australians have died in terrorist attacks since 9/11.

But the definition does not consider the essential question of why individuals and groups undertake terrorism and not some other form of political activity. Terrorists aim, through violent acts aimed at innocent citizens, to unsettle, punish, ferment societal upheaval and remove the confidence of people in their government - particularly in its ability to exercise sovereignty and ensure their security. They also seek the oxygen of publicity for their cause, undertaking attacks that maximise the potential audience by maximising the casualties.

Terrorism is not new. Depending on when you choose to start, the use of terrorism as a strategy stretches back over centuries. Guy Faulkes would probably be described today as a would-be terrorist. “Modern terrorism” is assessedⁱⁱ probably to have begun in the 19th Century.

As we look at it today, a diverse range of terrorist threats including religious, issue and ideologically focused –left- and right-wing political individuals, groups and movements – confront us. But it is the threat to Australia and Australian interests from terrorism undertaken by Islamist extremists, and the evolution of those involved in this, that is currently of most concern for ASIO.

Islamist extremism, and the terrorist activity that flows from it, is a global phenomenon with the totalitarian ideology and inspiration of al-Qa'ida and like-minded extremists having exploded into terrorist violence all over the world, be it in North America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia or North, East and West Africa, over the past two decades. Those involved seek motivation, legitimacy and justification for their use of violence (directed against “non-believers” or, more simply, anyone they perceive as being against them and their beliefs) from a self-righteous, twisted and, I suspect, hatred-filled interpretation of

one of the world's great and enriching religions - Islam. We have seen not dissimilar phenomena or distortions in other great religions over the centuries.

Violent Islamist extremism maintains a very small level of support amongst the fringe of the fringe of the Muslim community here in Australia. Those involved here tend to operate outside of the mainstream Muslim orthodoxy in a smattering of locations across Australia. I must make it clear - in no way are they representative of the overwhelming majority of Australian Muslims, who consider their activities to be abhorrent and offer no support to them. I will return to this point later.

The terrorist threat posed by Islamist extremists continues to evolve, as violent criminals seek to gain footholds across Africa and the Middle East – and in South East Asia. Wherever ungoverned space or apparent freedom to operate appears, they seek to take advantage. Some of the groups threaten local targets whilst others seek to bring the fight to the West. All of them pose a threat to Western interests, including to Australians and Australian interests, wherever they are located.

We know enough about extremist Islamist objectives to know that Australia continues to be a terrorist target. Whilst there has not been a successful Islamist extremist terrorist attack inside Australia, this is not to say that there have not been attempts. Planning for mass casualty terrorist attacks within Australia has taken place over the past decade. The most significant have been disrupted by ASIO and its law enforcement partners – and subsequently dealt with in the courts. These attacks would have caused significant loss of life had they succeeded.

In recent years, we have seen enough al-Qa'ida publications and heard enough extremist chatter amongst Australian Islamist extremists to assess that the threat remains with us. We need to maintain an understanding of their activities as we can never be certain if and when this talk might turn into catastrophic action.

For a long time our principal concerns were the home-grown “lone wolf” or small extremist cells, influenced or trained by external ideologies but operating in Australia. They continue to be of concern.

However, the ongoing conflicts in Syria and now Iraq appear to be adding to the challenge in a more fundamental way. These conflicts have created a new hub for Islamist extremists, the scale and scope of which we have not seen elsewhereⁱⁱⁱ. This is creating a new generation of Islamist extremists, much as happened in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s – a cohort with whose activities and experience we spent many years subsequently having to contend.

The number of Australians who have sought to take part in the Syria and Iraq conflicts, or have sought to support extremists fighting there, is unprecedented. We assess around 150 Australians have become involved with Islamist extremists in Syria and Iraq, either by travelling to the region, attempting to travel or supporting groups there from Australia. This is not the first time we have seen involvement of Australians in overseas jihadist conflicts. But their number was much smaller and few were involved in the type and level of violence we are now seeing.

Why this is happening is a complex question.

Some of those travelling may not – at least initially – have gone with extremist intentions, motivated instead by a wish to help other Muslims or live what they believe to be a truly Islamic lifestyle. However, a combination of the greater resources available to extremist groups, their globalist agenda, the extreme radicalisation caused by the violence they are exposed to and the keenness of extremist groups to accept foreign fighters all appear to play a role in their increasing alignment with the most extreme groups there, and for them to fight and die in support of this extremist ideology. Others have a clear intent right from the outset to join extremists or support them from here.

Experience suggests that any conflict that takes in the Levant – a region with longstanding ties to Australia - will provoke strong reactions here. But we have seen that reaction spread far beyond those with lineage back to the Middle East.

Syria and Iraq are also “social media” wars. Graphic and highly emotive social media coverage – through the ubiquitous mediums such as Facebook and Twitter that are well known to us all - has brought these conflicts directly to Australians in a way no other similar conflict has been presented before. Extremists use this new media to disseminate their message, interactively bringing their gory barbarity back to Australia, with the aim of radicalising young Australians in real time as they sit at home or wait for buses and trains in the morning.

And it has been Australians who have been doing this, Australians involved with the worst of the worst in terms of extremist groups inside Syria and Iraq. These individuals have chosen to publicise a series of abhorrent acts of wanton viciousness with the aim of recruiting others, as well spreading

panic and fear (often through social media) – and then reveling in the notoriety they receive.

Australians are now acting as English language Islamist extremist propagandists, accessing audiences and contacts they could not have dreamed of before social media to connect them. They, and other predatory radicalisers, continue to target often already alienated individuals, isolating and then grooming and further radicalising them - with the conflicts in Syria and Iraq central in their narrative whilst doing so.

Another trend is the youth of those we see being attracted to Islamist extremism. The recent suicide bombing allegedly undertaken by an Australian in Iraq is illustrative; a teenager whose journey took him from the suburbs of Australia to fight and where his radicalisation and grooming was such that he was allegedly prepared to kill himself and others for a terrorist organisation in a foreign land he barely knew. These terrorist organisations, which young Australians are joining, are willing to sacrifice young brain-washed souls in the name of a distorted, hate-filled interpretation of Islam. This would have been the second Australian Islamist extremist suicide bomber inside Syria and Iraq in less than a year. Until then, Australia had never seen one.

It is of concern that so many Australians are actively choosing allegiance with the most extreme groups, seemingly drawn by the group's uncompromising violent ideology, nihilistic intent and (the now realised) desire to re-establish an Islamic Caliphate, a concept rejected or ignored by most mainstream Muslims.

For ASIO, the individuals involved with this violence are indicative of the levels of brutality and extremism that Australians in Syria and Iraq are being exposed to, and will bring

with them wherever they chose to travel to next, be it back to Australia or another country elsewhere in the world.

Those with extremist groups in Syria and Iraq who are returning here – or other countries - represent a serious threat. We have seen tens of Australians return already. Experience suggests upon return some will disengage from extremist activities. But others will have had their Islamist extremist mindset reinforced by their experience. They will also hold an increased status and influence for some in the communities to which they have returned, giving them the potential ability to radicalise others. The networks both here and overseas, experience and expertise that they have now gained – and can offer to others –will perpetuate the scale of the threat posed.

We continue – with law enforcement colleagues – to work to understand the totality of the threat that these returnees may pose. But we have already seen indications that individuals elsewhere who had fought in Syria have become involved in terrorist-related activities upon their return. Based on past experience we can anticipate that extremists will use Syria and Iraq as a safe-haven to plan, train for and direct attacks in the West.

What we have seen so far probably represents only the first manifestation of this threat. The unprecedented numbers involved and the diverse range of source countries mean that even if only a portion eventually poses a threat, the scale of this will be considerable. It is of relevance to note that of the Australians who trained with al-Qa'ida or its affiliates in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1990s and 2000s, almost all returned to Australia and were involved in some form of terrorist-

related activity, with around a third of them subsequently arrested and/or convicted of terrorism offenses.

Any threat to Australian interests is exacerbated by the number of South-East Asian extremists fighting in Syria and Iraq. We are seeing South East Asians from across the region travelling to join these extremist groups. Much of the threat posed by South East Asian extremists has been reduced by the actions of regional governments, but increased exposure to extremists in Syria and Iraq could re-energise this, potentially increasing the threat in our region.

So what can we do to protect our citizens from these potential threats?

After five years in the job, my advice remains that the Australian public should not become paranoid and jump at the shadows of immediate, impending or inevitable catastrophe. The threat of terrorism will be with us for some time but it must not be allowed to dominate our lives. We should maintain our awareness, use the anti-terrorist hotline if necessary, and, above all, place our trust in Australian governments to be vigilant on our behalf.

Second, we should use the powers of the state to protect both the community and the individual. We should use the courts to prosecute where necessary. Australia has an international obligation not to export terrorism; we should continue where the intelligence warrants to withdraw passports in order to prevent individuals becoming involved in terrorism overseas.

Third, we should ensure the national security intelligence organisation and law enforcement bodies have the legal powers and technical skills and resources to maintain vigilance in a world where the technical and threat environments are changing almost daily. The special powers devoted to the protection and security of the community as a whole, the first duty of any government, should be commensurate with our respect for civil liberties and the rights of the individual. Getting that balance right will be a subject of constant debate and frequent passion. But we cannot afford to get that balance wrong.

Recently announced potential legislative changes and increased funding focused on counter-terrorism for a range of Australian government agencies, including my own, reflect the seriousness of the response across government, whilst maintaining the appropriate balances between community security and individual rights.

Fourth, we should not let the phenomenon of violent Islamist extremism destroy the community harmony that is such an essential characteristic of Australia's highly successful multicultural democracy. That is precisely what violent extremism and terrorism want to do.

Nor should we be critical of a whole community based on the actions of a tiny minority of misguided individuals. In my experience the overall leadership of the community of Muslim Australians in dealing with these issues, always in their own quiet way, has been outstanding.

In this sense, the Australian Muslim community has made, and will continue to make, its own valuable contributions to our national character, our national livelihood, our national security and to our national cohesion.

Fifth, we all need to understand that Australia's counter-terrorism arrangements are not directed at Muslim Australians, they are directed at terrorism. Our efforts are designed to protect both Muslim Australians and non-Muslim Australians alike.

It was for this reason that I was upset by the headline in last Saturday's *The Australian*: "We'll fight Islam for 100 years" it read. Let me reiterate, we are not fighting Islam, in Australia or anywhere else. We are fighting the terrorism that kills innocent people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, as the actual text of the article went on to imply, belying the absurdity of the headline.

Let me conclude.

The terrorist phenomenon will be with us for some time. The role of my organisation and law enforcement is to work together to identify and prevent Islamist extremist terrorist planning from developing into attacks at home and overseas. We will continue to do this not only using special powers but, more importantly, working with the community of Muslim Australians, whom it is our duty to protect in exactly the same way as we seek to protect all other Australians.
