

Counter-terrorism in Australia

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2017 has been a game changer in terms of terrorism. This paper describes the international terrorist landscape in 2017 and Australia's response, explaining where we are, how we got there, and where we are headed. The response is illustrated by recent cases studies. Carroll concludes that Australia is well-placed to continue to pre-empt and meet the terrorism challenge.

Key words: terrorism; counter-terrorism; Australia.

2017 was a game-changing year in terms of terrorism. Terrorists successfully inflicted multiple high-casualty attacks in the seemingly impregnable United Kingdom; Islamist insurgency in Indonesia – all but defeated in the past decade and a half – has seen signs of resurgence, with a series of small-scale attacks, supported by foreign fighters; and in scenes reminiscent of Islamic State's (IS) dramatic capture of Mosul, a small number of extremists aligned with that terrorist group overran the southern Philippines city of Marawi in May.

It seems that terrorism – acts of terror, disrupted plots, arrests, new counter-terrorism laws and policies (and accompanying public outrage and debate over new counter-terrorism laws and policies) – is a daily news item.

With a threat ranging from local to global, along with myriad activities underway at all levels to attempt to prepare for and respond to the threat, it can be challenging to make sense of what is happening, how this complex matter is evolving, and where Australia sits within it all. This paper provides a broad overview to explain where we are, how we got there, and where we are headed.

Terrorism

The terrorist landscape certainly appears, on the surface, to have been on a clear and simple upwards trajectory of violence, mayhem and reach. It is worthwhile, therefore, to place the terrorist threat in its global context.

A few weeks prior to this talk, Australia entered the fourth year of its terrorist threat alert level being at 'PROBABLE: a terrorist attack is likely'. This means that terrorists are assessed to have both the intent and capability to undertake attacks. The change to Australia's threat level in September 2014 came a few weeks after the relatively new IS terrorist group—an offshoot of Al Qaeda—declared a so-called 'caliphate', having aggressively taken over the northern Iraqi city of Mosul and parts of northern Syria.

The ferocity of the IS terrorist movement, and its ability to attract more than 50,000 foreign fighters to its cause, heralded an extraordinary threat. The propaganda of IS and similar Islamist terrorist organisations called for supporters

to inflict attacks wherever and whenever they could. The Paris attacks of November 2015 demonstrated the ability of IS in particular to strike with terrible effect at the heart of relatively safe countries, and to inspire terror with the group's desire to harm anyone, anywhere.

For Western countries, much of the debate around the cause of the threat has been focused on issues between Islam and the West. One of the flow-on effects of this has been Western countries looking inwards to identify what it is that might be causing this problem within their own societies – and there is merit in this, particularly in multicultural countries such as Australia, where local Muslim communities are the targets of terrorist propaganda. Describing the threat in this way, however, is problematic as Islamist terrorist propaganda aimed towards Western countries and communities characterises the issue as a battle between Islam and the West.

It can be a surprise to be reminded that the main focus of terrorism and the greatest harm being caused by terrorist attacks worldwide is not in the West but in parts of the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. And that the victims of terrorist attacks are mostly citizens of these countries, and mostly Muslim.

The annual Global Terrorism Index tracks overall terrorism trends since 2001, and identifies the countries most affected by terrorism to be Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Syria, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia; a list that has remained relatively constant for the past few years (IEP 2017). The top ten is rounded out with India, Turkey and Libya. Excluding India and Turkey, where terrorism comes from a mix of ethno-nationalist and Islamist groups, it is Islamist terrorist groups that are the primary cause of terrorist-related conflict in the other countries. Each country, with the exception of India, has one major terrorist group that is responsible for the majority of attacks and deaths.

Despite the high-profile attacks in Europe from 2015 to 2017, Europe experienced comparatively few terrorist attacks, while Australia barely rates a mention. And, while the United States remains the favourite target of Islamist extremist groups based on the number of mentions in propaganda, this has not translated into significant numbers of either Islamist terrorist attacks in the United States or American foreign fighters (University of Maryland 2016)².

But it is also clear that, despite the relatively low impact of terrorist attacks on countries such as Australia, the intent to conduct attacks remains. Since September 2014,

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²The majority of terrorist attacks in the United States continue to be associated with right-wing extremism rather than Islamist extremism.

Australia has experienced five terrorist attacks; all single actor, low-level attacks. In the same period, authorities disrupted 14 significant terrorist plots, most of which were assessed to be inspired by Islamist extremism in the Middle East.

IS in particular attracted notoriety and supporters through its actions in the Middle East and elsewhere. This has provided both inspiration and practical support to planning, plotting and resourcing terrorist attacks elsewhere, as seen with IS in the Middle East directing the November 2015 Paris attacks. The connections that have been made through the Middle East conflict have also provided a boost to insurgent groups, as seen with the financial and technical support provided by IS to aligned groups in Marawi in the Philippines in May (Blaxland *et al.* 2017) and the Sydney aviation plotters of July 2017 (Carroll 2017a) – discussed further below.

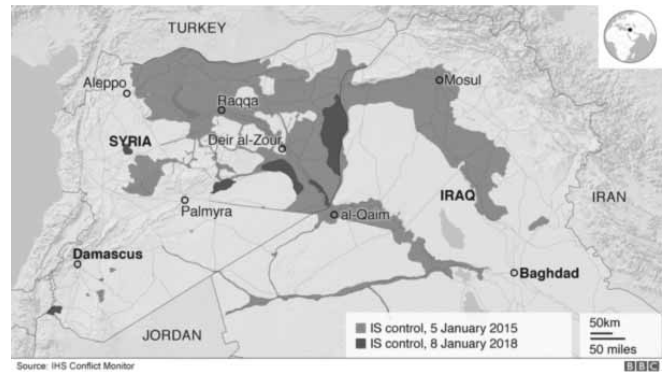
IS reinvented the Islamist terrorist narrative to provide a simple cause that was open to all. Combined with the territory and resources it held for three years in Iraq and Syria, it made a potent impact on the international security environment.

But just as IS's rapid capture of areas of Iraq and Syria – and the populations and resources they contained – made it into one of the most powerful and wealthy terrorist groups in history, so its steady loss of territory during this time has seen it contract to a far less potent force. While territory was extremely empowering for IS, it is not essential for the group and the broader Islamist extremist cause to continue in other conflict zones and in the online environment. The death throes of IS's 'caliphate' have not been peaceful, and have seen the conflict move beyond the Middle East.

Since the end of 2016, we have seen devastating attacks on a Christmas market in Berlin, a shopping district in Stockholm, a train station in St Petersburg, the concert arena in Manchester, vehicle attacks driving into pedestrians at London's Westminster Bridge and London Bridge, and Barcelona's iconic Las Ramblas.

These attacks are exactly what analysts and governments have been advising – with concern – would likely happen with IS's defeat in Iraq and Syria. It is also what the terrorists themselves have been telling us they wanted to happen. It was back in September 2014 that IS spokesman Muhammad al-Adnani proclaimed to all followers unable to come to the Middle East to take up what they could and attack at home (Wroe 2014).

In 2016, as the Iraqi-led coalition began making headway liberating first Fallujah then other towns in Iraq from IS, the terrorists began not only calling for more attacks outside, but seeking to proclaim new territories and groups outside the Middle East as the newest home for the caliphate. First it was North Africa, but then France, the United Kingdom, United States and Italy began supporting local efforts to oust IS; then the new IS Khorasan Province was announced for Afghanistan, but has essentially failed, with the al-Qaeda-linked Taliban instead making a comeback and seen as a better brand for local fighters to back. And next IS announced its so-called East Asia *wilayat*³, which struck its first blow with Marawi.



Map: Territory lost by IS between 5 January 2015 and 8 January 2018 [Source: IHS Conflict Monitor].

The bottom line is clear: while IS had a spectacular start, its physical 'caliphate' is no more, and its brand and resources are leeching elsewhere – out of necessity rather than design.

While the defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria is a good thing, it is not an open and shut matter. The complex array of factors that gave rise to this phenomenon largely remain at play in that region. And the very modern factors of globalisation and communications that enabled the rapid rise and successes to date of IS and other groups are also enabling it to engage beyond the region into Southeast Asia and elsewhere. While much diminished in capability, the group has also continued to put its main effort into information – that is, propaganda – and are peddling a simple, effective and ever-changing narrative to continue to justify its changing fortunes and actions as being all part of its plan.

Counter-terrorism and Australia

Despite the ongoing high threat level, Australia's approach to counter-terrorism has been very successful to date. Low-level attacks have occurred, but all mass-casualty plots have – so far – been disrupted. And should a major attack occur, planning and resources have been invested in responding effectively to minimise harm, and to recover (Carroll 2017b).

Australia's approach to counter-terrorism includes an array of actions at the international, regional and domestic levels. As the locus and inspiration for the current terrorist threat is in the Middle East, Australia has contributed to international coalition efforts to remove IS from Iraq and Syria, and actively supported other multinational efforts, including the various United Nations Security Council resolutions to counter IS and other terrorist groups, and to counter the movement of foreign fighters. In the region, Australia and Indonesia jointly initiated the Asia-Pacific Counter-Terrorism Financing Summit, which brings together governments, think-tanks, banks and financial remittance companies to collaborate on tracking terrorist use of the finance sector and shutting down their ability to use banking and remittances to finance terrorism.

Australia has continued to be actively involved in counter-terrorism initiatives in Southeast Asia since the Bali bombings of 2002, and the joint response to this and other attacks has contributed to good relations with counter-terrorism agencies in Indonesia in particular, as well as other countries of the region. 2017 saw Australia provide military assistance to the Philippines following the terrorist

³Wilayat' is an Arabic term meaning a province, governorate or state.

attack on Marawi; Royal Australian Air Force P3 Orion long-range maritime patrol aircraft and associated capability support elements provided intelligence and communications support; while Australian Army trainers later drew upon their experience in training the Iraq military, to do the same to assist the Armed Forces of the Philippines prepare for operations against IS-aligned groups in urban areas.

Australia's ongoing assistance to countering terrorism globally and in the region, is an important contribution to minimising the threat abroad as well as at home. Should the insurgency in the southern Philippines succeed, this could provide a safe haven for terrorists in the region. While the assault on Marawi city was ultimately defeated, how the Philippines government deals with the affected population in the future will play an important role in determining whether the area will remain resilient to the impact of global Islamist extremism.

The success of Australia's counter-terrorism agencies in thwarting attempted mass casualty attacks, is testament to the considered and collaborative approach Australia has taken to countering terrorism in the decade and a half since 9-11⁴. Australia has benefitted from bipartisanship on national security and a collaborative approach between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories, formally supported by a dedicated counter-terrorism body, the Australian and New Zealand Counter Terrorism Committee (ANZCTC), reporting to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). This means that federal, state and territory governments have built upon and learned from initiatives and developments, and work to ensure consistency in policy, law and practice between jurisdictions, reaffirmed by COAG at its October 2017 meeting.

Check and Balances

This collaborative approach to countering terrorism means that Australia has seen a lot of counter-terrorism activity, and, as a vibrant liberal democracy, this has attracted a high level of public debate. Getting the balance right between personal liberty and collective safety is the key issue for national security. While Australia's counter-terrorism laws, agencies and programmes have increased, this has also been accompanied by high levels of oversight and review. Of note, it is now common practice for new federal counter-terrorism laws to be immediately referred from the House of Representatives to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security for an inquiry that typically includes public hearings; counter-terrorism and other national security laws also have their own Independent National Security Legislation Monitor; and the more restrictive laws have statutory review and/or sunset clauses written into the legislation. These supplement the existing oversight mechanisms for counter-terrorism agencies such as the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security as well as the role of the judiciary for criminal offences. These checks and balances are robust and necessary.

Federal Institutional Arrangements

How government agencies are postured to counter

terrorism has also been subject to regular review, both internal and external. The most recent of these, 2017's Independent Intelligence Review, identified a range of ways for Australia's intelligence agencies to better integrate and co-ordinate, including through the establishment of a new Office of National Intelligence. In announcing the findings of the review and endorsing its recommendations, the Government also announced the establishment of a new Department of Home Affairs, to bring together a range of counter-terrorism and law enforcement agencies as well as immigration and border protection to provide a greater strategic focus to counter terrorism and crime⁵. Both new agencies are now operational.

The responsibility to counter terrorism has extended beyond government to include the private sector and communities. While a National Security Hotline has been in place for a number of years for the public to report security concerns and owners of critical infrastructure have long been involved in government counter-terrorism forums, 2017 saw enhanced information to assist businesses and event organisers to identify terrorism risk for themselves, supported by advice from counter-terrorism agencies, through the guidelines and resources provided in the new publication, *Australia's strategy for protecting crowded places from terrorism* (ANZCTC 2017).

Case Studies

Terrorism in Australia

But despite the comprehensive, sensible and collaborative approach to developing counter-terrorism policy, laws and programmes, the terrorist threat continues to pose challenges.

Operation Kastelholm: Disrupted plots in Australia since the end of 2016 have shown some disturbing trends. Two days before Christmas 2016, authorities advised that a plot to undertake a mass casualty, multiple-venue attack in the Melbourne CBD at Christmas had been disrupted. The plan to use firearms, improvised explosives and knives was well advanced, although the plotters were finding it difficult to obtain firearms due to the effective firearms management regime in Australia. Under Operation Kastelholm, authorities had been investigating the case for around three weeks, ensuring they obtained sufficient evidence for prosecution, while also ensuring there was no risk of a successful attack. While the group appeared to be home-grown, members are alleged to have drawn inspiration and some technical support for the activity from IS. Australian Federal Police Commissioner Andrew Colvin described this as the most sophisticated and complex attack seen to date and one which, if it had succeeded, would have been Australia's worst terrorist attack by far⁶.

Operation Silves: Eight months later, similar words were being used to describe the aviation and mass gathering plots uncovered in Sydney through Operation Silves (Carroll 2017a). This case saw the greatest level of IS involvement in an Australian case to date: it is alleged that the group made contact with IS through an Australian

⁴The terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington DC on 11 September 2001. This date is typically used to define the modern Islamist terrorist threat era.

⁵The Honourable Malcolm Turnbull MP, Prime Minister of Australia, *Press Conference with the Attorney-General, Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, and Minister for Justice: National Security Reform Announcement*, 18 July 2017.

foreign fighter who was related to some of the group's members; and that technical planning support, as well as componentry for weapons, was provided directly to the group from IS in the Middle East. And the turnaround times for disruption were much shorter than the Melbourne case: instead of three weeks, authorities were aware of the plot only a few days before disruption. This demonstrates that the group put substantial effort into avoiding the attention of authorities; their success in doing so alarmed the agencies as well as the Australian public. As furious debate ensued around the world on terrorist use of encrypted communication, and any attempt to deal with that being seen as an attack on privacy, it appears that these freely-available capabilities were being used by IS to plan an attack on an airplane and then on a crowded public place in Australia.

Australians Supporting Terrorism Abroad

These two cases demonstrate the ongoing intent by IS to attack Australia, and to provide advice and resources to supporters in Australia. Other cases in 2017 show the support going the other way.

In May, a man was arrested in rural New South Wales – under the broader Operation Marksbury investigation – for seeking to assist IS in the Middle East with laser-guided missile targeting (Carroll and Batt 2017). The individual was related to a family who had provided funds to IS and relocated overseas from Sydney to assist IS with the Eastern European illegal weapons market.

In July, two men were arrested and charged with illegal firearms and drugs supply in a case that was uncovered by the state Joint Counter-Terrorism Team. While not charged with terrorism offences, the case came to light due to the men being related to known extremists, and indicated a possible link between organised crime and terrorism.

In October, a man was arrested in Melbourne for providing funds to IS and managing an IS propaganda and fundraising website on behalf of an American foreign fighter.

Islamic State Keeping its Profile Alive

The setbacks experienced by IS in Iraq and Syria are seeing the group rethink its approach, including attempting to keep its profile alive elsewhere in the world. This is concerning for Australia and the region. IS and other terrorist groups are continuing to form links with other groups and individuals around the world and provide resources to those who will take action in their name. In Marawi and the Sydney aviation plot, for example, this included providing technical information, planning assistance and weapons components to undertake attacks. Readily accessible encrypted communications facilitate these connections between terrorist groups and are widely used by terrorist groups and their supporters to communicate freely and away from scrutiny of authorities.

Conclusion

In the three-and-a-half years since the dramatic rise of IS, the terrorist threat to Australia has evolved and changed. And so has Australia's counter-terrorism response. The

defeat of IS in Iraq by the coalition of which Australia is a member, along with the forthcoming defeat of the group's elements in Syria and its affiliate in the Philippines, have removed much of the power and potency of the movement. But the broader terrorist threat endures, with global reach.

The technical and communications linkages, in particular, that have supported the economic and social developments of the global environment, have also played an important part in supporting the global expansion of an international brand of terrorism. This has seen conflicts and movements on the other side of the world resonate with Australians and others to a magnitude not previously seen; it has also fostered an easy and convenient relationship of disparate parties to share technical information, advice, propaganda and funds.

The global linkages between terrorists are matched and exceeded, however, by alliances, information sharing and practical support between countries, organisations and communities. As an active player in the international counter-terrorism community, Australia is well-placed to continue to pre-empt and meet the challenge of terrorism with partners internationally and locally.

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⁶The Honourable Malcolm Turnbull MP, Prime Minister of Australia, *Joint Press Conference with the Minister for Justice the Hon Michael Keenan MP and the Australian Federal Police Commissioner Andrew Colvin APM OAM*, 23 December 2016.