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2014

First rule of fighting terrorists: don't do their job for them

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Recommended Citation

Baldino, Daniel, "First rule of fighting terrorists: don't do their job for them" (2014). *Arts Book Chapters*. 36.
https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_chapters/36

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The dilemma for the university is distressing but straightforward: do we accept a fall in quality as the public subsidy diminishes yet again, or seek flexibility to match the student contribution to the real cost of delivering tertiary education and address inadequacies in the current system? This question is bigger than fee levels, since it goes to a status quo already riddled with inequitable distribution of available public funding.

Students and staff alike hold dear the importance of universities to the nation, and the overriding importance of adequate public funding. Those running our universities feel likewise the responsibility of ensuring the highest-quality university possible.

It is not in students' interests to reduce the quality of their education to avoid unpopular fee rises. This is a choice no one welcomes, but a question we cannot avoid.

The University of Melbourne is a public-spirited university committed to excellence in research, teaching and learning and engagement. In the best of all possible worlds, that mission would be proudly and unstintingly supported by the nation. Our reality, alas, makes for harder choices.



First rule of fighting terrorists: don't do their job for them

Daniel Baldino

It appears that Australia might be put on a higher threat alert level. ASIO director-general David Irvine's comments on a possible increase in the terrorism threat level (which came into force in 2003) have created a wave of flurry, concern and nervous anticipation. As Irvine explained:

The notion of a threat level at medium is that an attack is possible or could occur. If we raise it to high it means an attack is likely.

Certainly, a fundamental security challenge is how intelligence and police agencies can best deal with potential home-grown terrorists and their allies. For instance, Britain has raised its threat level to “severe” in response to events in Iraq and Syria. So how should the Australian government and its citizens best respond?

Back to the future

Despite Osama Bin Laden receiving a bullet to the head in May 2011 and a weakened al-Qaeda — which is on the run and characterised by paralysis, incompetence and infighting — Australia’s terrorism threat level is potentially poised to rise from medium to high for the first time since inception.

This seems to revolve around deteriorating conflicts in the Middle East, the evils of Islamic State (IS) and Sunni militia groups, and salvos about “Aussie jihadists”. About 60 Australians are reportedly fighting in either Iraq or Syria.

Yet every measure put forward to manage the threat of citizens being involved with extremist groups abroad should not be understood as automatically acceptable or validated. A plausible strategy for countering IS has not yet been clearly articulated. And talking more openly about the greatest sources of funding for IS, including the role of Saudi Arabia, would inject a bit more honesty and intricacy into the debate.

It is worth noting that over that past decade many have argued that Australia’s decision to join the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was never a straightforward “mission accomplished”. Rather, it ultimately exacerbated existing ethnic and religious tensions, in turn making Australia less safe from terrorism.

It directly led to the “balkanisation” of Iraq. Adding insult to injury, purported WMDs eventually stood for “weapons of mass

disappearance”, while the dictator Saddam Hussain had no direct relationship with the tragedy of 9/11.

The “Team Australia” narrative

This has been a muddying period of scatter-gun political exchanges, mixed security narratives and gloomy media reporting.

We have, for instance, had the Abbott government insist that renewed or enlarged participation in military operations in Iraq and Syria will not put Australia at increased risk. Yet both intelligence agencies and government have been anxious to win support for expanded powers under new security legislation.

Similarly, while team Abbott has appeared eager to focus on an escalating terrorist situation at home and abroad, security assessments have not been in lock-step with political attempts to jump-start a new dialogue of national security menace. The threat status remained stubbornly unchanged.

This might change. Yet the stronger terror assessment scenario painted by ASIO does seem rather odd. Irvine chose to speculate publicly about the threat alert being raised to the second-highest level, ostensibly before giving formal advice to the government.

Based on ongoing assessments, either a threat is likely to occur or it is not. If so, why the delay? If not, why prematurely raise a “worst-case” scenario? Citizens remain stuck in terror limbo.

Further, this drip-feed of vague warnings is being packaged by policymakers with a hyper-legislative insistence on introducing another round of “tough” terror laws. While some measures appear justifiable — such as up-to-date powers to suspend passports — many others do not. Some proposals remain decidedly inconsistent with past recommendations by watchdogs like the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor.

Overall, it can be argued that many shortcomings and the lack of practical fine-tuning evident in core elements of

Australia's counter-terrorism legislation are the result of undue haste. Governments have rushed to pass laws without appropriate scrutiny and related checks and balances. We seem to be stuck on a rinse-and-repeat cycle to keep terrorising ourselves.

A fine line between public alert and panic

The head of ASIO publicly musing about terror threats has undoubtedly had a virtually identical impact to the anticipated actual adjustment (or non-adjustment) of the National Terrorism Public Alert System. It has grabbed headlines and accelerated political chatter and public speculation.

Problematically, this has created rolling confusion. Much work remains to be done to keep uncertainty about terrorism in perspective.

The alert system has limited usefulness in guiding people's movements. It is not tied to any specific action — unless self-imposed and completely arbitrary.

Do we stay home? Do we avoid public transport or airports or crowded movie theatres or the AFL finals series? Do we shun strangers with beards? Do we re-read (or re-find) our Howard government-issued fridge magnets for instructions while setting our mobile phones to automatically dial the terrorist hotline when our spider-sense tingles (sorry, I can never remember the number)?

This type of "alert and alarmed" scenario tends to lead in a couple of directions: it either creates wider public paranoia or greater public scepticism. Neither is particularly helpful for an effective, sustainable and clear-eyed counter-terrorism strategy.

Serving the terrorists' agenda

A variety of policymakers and media are doing their best to contribute to the manipulation of revived fears about terrorism. Social media in particular have become highly effective in spreading violent extremist ideology and propaganda. Brutal

decapitations such as that of American journalist James Foley are instantaneously available worldwide.

But imagine that the most effective weapon against the West for the IS is actually terror. Imagine that terrorists are hoping to provoke shock and fear; they aim to terrorise. Imagine that these ugly videos are entirely ineffective in changing the direction of the US in its involvement with expanded air campaigns and drone strikes against IS.

That would leave the only substantial impact these beheadings can have on Western audiences as a psychological one of building IS into a sort of shadowy, omnipresent super-villain that is hell-bent on world domination.

Yet the noise emanating from IS is mostly crude bluff and ludicrous chest-beating. It is critical to match its well-echoed and grandiose intentions with a calculation of its actual capacity to form a self-proclaimed caliphate throughout the Middle East, North Africa and large parts of western Asia and Europe. This capacity is zero. It is based on an illusion.

IS is a threat to specific people in parts of Iraq and Syria. It might dictate terms within some lawless and poorly defended areas. But IS does not have the ability to march into Pakistan. Or to take Baghdad (being “close” to Bagdad does not count). In fact, this splinter movement has struggled to hold the riverside town of Dhuluiya, which is part of a belt of Sunni Muslim towns.

IS is in ongoing battles not only with US hellfire missiles but with rival jihadist, terrorist and rebel groups. As al-Qaeda eventually realised, the IS brand of savagery and its core blood-thirsty organisation will continue to alienate support from both local and global Islamic communities.

In short, IS is a nasty piece of work, but it is not a global game-changer.

Frustratingly, while making nonsensical noises about IS power, reach and authority, it is head-shaking that the Prime Minister would then reward IS propaganda by implying that

such unbridled violence and accompanying beheadings could happen on Australian soil before long.

The instinct to “do something” and heroic calls to strong vigilant action might be good politics. However, such heavy-handedness is a careless and unhealthy national security stratagem.

What next?

The bad news is that the conflict in Iraq and Syria will remain an incubator for a new generation of terrorists.

While individual motivations and profiles will vary, foreign fighters from all parts of the globe are joining the combat. The problem of war travellers who go to fight in foreign locations and return home after operating in radicalising environments is a serious security challenge.

Issues like detaining or arresting citizens before they have left for a conflict zone — without solid evidence — will continue to be complicated.

The good news is that the threat of foreign fighters is both manageable and marginal. The coherence and capabilities of the IS splinter group should not be overstated.

Another bottom line is that these Australian foreign fighters do not represent the wider Islamic community — IS is keen to kill all Muslims who they deem to be “infidels”. (This makes many calls for “community” solutions by the overwhelming moderate Muslim majority in Australia overly simplistic.)

This is not a clash of civilisations. Australian citizens still have more chance of being killed by bee stings or car crashes than by a rare, albeit conceivable, home-grown terrorist attack.

Interestingly, former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger recently warned that traditional state-based threats remain a much more serious and long-term security headache:

I consider Iran a bigger problem than ISIS. ISIS is a group of adventurers with a very aggressive ideology. But they have to conquer more and more territory before they can become a strategic, permanent reality.

The lesson is not to dismiss the IS threat but to respond in a proportionate, carefully calibrated fashion, to avoid hyping terror risks and to invest in smart counter-radical campaigns. The building of public resilience — the ability of society to restore calm and for citizens to adapt rationally to random events and unexpected changes (from terror strikes to shark attacks) — remains indispensable.

The more immediate hazard is pointless overreaction and political exploitation of public fears. The build-up of these kind of tensions have had a track-record of leading into knee-jerk and totally counter-productive policy initiatives — like the unnecessary Iraq invasion of 2003. That had no clear national security benefit and contributed to much of this latest mess.



National security gags on media force us to trust state will do no wrong

Rick Sarre

It has been said that the line between good investigative reporting and inappropriate journalistic prying is never clearly drawn. Journalists usually complain long and hard when governments intervene to move the line. So they will not be impressed with what has happened this week.

In the shadow of the recent anti-terrorism raids across New South Wales and Queensland, the Abbott government has passed legislation (with Labor support) designed specifically to silence those who would seek to report particular anti-terrorism measures.