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SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

The Threat to Australia

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SECTARIAN VIOLENCE — THE THREAT TO AUSTRALIA

Abstract

Neither the presence of Australian foreign fighters overseas nor sectarian-related security concerns in Australia are entirely new to this country. However, the current issues surrounding Australian jihadists fighting in Syria and Iraq are qualitatively different. These foreign fighters have a simplistic worldview that divides the world into those who believe and those that don't, and seeks the establishment of an Islamic state that is at best a chimera. They represent a security threat to Australia. The Australian Government has instituted a series of preventative programs and punitive measures to dissuade would-be fighters, but despite this their numbers have grown. Islamic community leaders have been slow to respond to the ideological threat in a timely, unequivocal and appropriate manner compared to those advocating jihad. Australia's Muslim leaders need to understand and a cknowledge the nature of the threat, the ways in which their youth are being influenced, and to be more proactive, focused and public in their construction and dissemination of a counter-narrative.

Introduction

The nature of our security threats is rarely easily foretold. Thousands of analysts spend millions of hours trying to assess what represents the main threats to citizens. It is a difficult task, given the number of variables that are involved in predicting the future. State-on-state conflict is the traditional stock-in-trade, but is becoming less and less common, even though some security analysts prophesise a near - inevitable clash between a rising China and the United States. For others, the era of cyber threat is the new way in which state-on-state conflict is played out. Nationalist struggles—certainly one of the main motivators for conflict since the end of the Second World War—continue to bedevil the world, as the dispute between Russia and the Ukraine attests. The threat of nuclear conflict, with the exception of possible Iranian-driven proliferation, has even been relegated to a second-order security issue. Yet it is one of the oldest and most persistent sources of conflict, sectarian identity and its attendant predisposition towards religiously motivated violence, that has remained one of the primary security concerns for the West for more than a decade. Yet, for a threat that bedevils analysts and represents an unambiguous danger to Australians, the issue of sectarian identity rarely features as an explicit security threat, more often than not being couched in terms of a general terrorist threat in the same way that nationalist, anarchist, or white supremacist threats are portrayed.

But religious intolerance and its consequent invocation of God to justify persecuting or killing others because of their religious identity (or lack thereof), remains a persistent global phenomenon. It has led to the deaths of thousands of Westerners and tens, if not hundreds of thousands of non-Westerners since September 2001. Whether it is religious violence in Nigeria, intra-communal violence in Pakistan, Iraq and Syria, or the persecution of Rohingya Muslims by elements of the majority Buddhist population in Burma, there are few areas of the world where religious identity is not an influencing factor. Sectarian violence is also not confined to mainstream religions. We should not forget that religious groups were responsible for the Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo underground in 1995, while the standoff with the Branch Davidians—a breakaway group of Christians originally with Seventh Day Adventist roots—at Waco, Texas, in 1993 killed more than 80 people. Religiously motivated violence is a multi-faceted security threat.

For most Western countries, the ongoing threat from religious violence is largely anomalous to the increasing secularization of those societies. In the past decade, census data from Canada has shown the proportion of the population claiming to have no religion has risen from 16 to 24 per cent, in England and Wales from 15 to 25 per cent, and between 2001 and 2006 the percentage of New Zealanders professing to have no religion rose from 30 to 35 per cent.[1] Australia has followed this trend, with 22 per cent of people reporting no religion in the 2011 census; in the 1911 census

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[1]   Australian Social Trends November 2013, Australian Bureau of Statistics, http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30Nov+2013, accessed 25 May 2014.

only 0.4 per cent reported the same. Although religion rarely enters the public discourse in this country, that still leaves four out of five Australians professing to have a religious identity. When the subject of religion is considered publicly, it is often presented in a negative light. Such is the dominance of secular interests in much of the commentariat, that the former High Court Justice Dyson Heydon was moved recenly in a speech to the Centre for Independent Studies to talk of a new sectarianism in Australia in which 'there may be a new anti-Catholic movement particularly among our intellectuals.'[2]

For such a persistent security threat, religion and religious identity is rarely seen by security analysts and architects as a potential danger in its own right. It is difficult to obtain from publicly available government documents a sense of the degree to which religious motivation constitutes a threat, in either absolute or relative terms. Australia's 2010 Terrorism White Paper noted the centrality of radical Islam to the threat of terrorism in Australia. However, the 2013 National Security Statement went no further than making a banal observation in its section on 'Broader Global Challenges with National Security Implications' concerning the potential for religiously motivated violence: "Disparities in wealth and opportunities, and ethnic and religious differences more generally may affect social cohesion and cause unrest."[3] The ASIO annual report to parliament is more forthright in outlining the terrorist threat to Australia posed by radical Islamists.[4] A much more useful measure of the degree to which religiously motivated violence is a security threat can be gleaned from the EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2013 (TE-SAT 2013) that provides a detailed breakdown of the specific characteristics of each terrorist act in the EU during 2012, including a section on religiously inspired terrorism.[5]

While the majority of large-scale contemporary sectarian conflict is centred on the Middle East, the proliferation of social media outlets, ease of travel and growth of diasporic communities has meant that people are connected to and identify with groups with whom they have a shared identity in ways unimaginable a generation ago. In describing the sense of nationalism that bound people together with a shared identity even though they would likely never physically meet each other, Benedict Anderson spoke of 'imagined communities'.[6] The improved connectivity available to people from many countries nowadays has meant that such 'imagined communities' are even easier to create, and in more ways than they were when Anderson coined the phrase in1983.

So while religious conflict is hardly a new phenomenon, thanks to the information revolution—and particularly the growth in the reach and capabilities of social media—sectarianism is emerging as one of the greatest contemporary security challenges, and one of the most persistent that we face. Such is the international concern at the prospect of ongoing religiously motivated violence that in November 2013 the Iranian foreign minister Mohammed Javad Zarif posited that the sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shi'a is 'the most serious security threat not only to the region but also to the world at large.'[7]

In testifying before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in March 2014 regarding the Syrian conflict, Deputy Secretary of State William Burns stated that 'these [foreign] fighters, mostly Sunni extremists, represent a long-term threat to US security interests.'[8]

These senior government officials are right in highlighting the security threat posed by the current

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2   'Catholics victims of new racism', *The Australian*, 12 April 2014, http://www. theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/catholics-victims-of-new-racism/story-fn59niix-1226881416273#, accessed 25 May 2014.

3   *National Security Statement* p 31.

4   ASIO Annual Report to Parliament 2012-2013, 31 October 2013, http://www. asio.gov.au/img/files/ASIO-Report-to-Parliament-2012-13.pdf, accessed 9 June 2013.

5   Europol TE-SAT 2013, European Police Office 2013, https://www.europol. europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/europol_te-sat2013_lr_0.pdf

6   Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983, p 49.

7   'Iran FM: Sectarian strife is worst threat in world', BBC News, 11 November 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24893808, accessed 24 March 2014.

8   William J Burns testimony to the US Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs on 'Syria spillover: the Growing Threat of Terrorism and Sectarianism in the Middle East and Ukraine Update,' Washington DC, 6 March 2014, http://www.state. gov/s/d/2014/223030.htm, accessed 25 May 2014.

round of sectarian conflict. That is because the latest sectarian security threat is qualitatively different from what constituted sectarian conflict in the past. Today, radical Islamist terrorist groups such as ISIS, al-Qa'ida or any of its variants pose a singularly problematic threat. Unlike other state-based or nationalist security threats, these groups have no demands that are conceivably negotiable; they demand freedom of action in the areas they seek to control, but also promote a pan-nationalist agenda that has no realistic hope of being achieved. Their religious fanaticism divides the world into simplistic perceptions of believers and non-believers and allows the targeting of the latter. Such labeling means that Westerners and their allies can be attacked for being either Christian or secular, while fellow Muslims can be killed if they fall outside the jihadists' narrow definition of what a true believer constitutes.

Australia's past experience of sectarian threats

Sectarianism has long been a feature of Australian society, but until the mid-nineteenth century it largely reflected the centuries-old divide between Irish Catholics and English Protestants. The security fear of the Irish Catholics' presence in Australia was prevailingly a response to Irish nationalism rather than due to irreconcilable doctrinal or devotional differences. This concern was partly informed by the numbers of Australians of Irish heritage and the fear that they could mobilise their significant numbers if motivated to do so. There was certainly a great deal of sympathy for Irish nationalism among Australians prior to federation. On the centenary of the 1798 Uprising against the British in Ireland, the body of Michael Dwyer—a well-regarded local leader of the rebellion in County Wicklow who was subsequently transported to New South Wales—and that of his wife were moved from their original resting place in Devonshire Street to Waverley Cemetery. A memorial to Dwyer and other rebels was built at the cemetery and his reburial was enormous by any standards: the reinterment procession consisted of 400 carriages and 10,000 people, who were watched by a crowd of 100,000.

During the First World War Catholics were a large but under-represented minority amongst the all-volunteer 1st AIF. Regardless, the suspicions concerning sectarian loyalty lay close to the surface. The leading role played by Cardinal Daniel Mannix—Archbishop of Melbourne, renowned for his role in the anti-conscription debate—led some to believe that British Protestant values and loyalty to the crown needed to be upheld and led to the formation of the Loyalty League in 1918. This was motivated in part by the feeling that Irish Catholics posed a security threat to Australia.[9] The later partition of Ireland and maturing of Australian society largely put an end to a view of the Irish—and hence Catholics—as a possible security threat.

Australia and secto-nationalist threats

Australia has not been immune from sectarian-related terrorist actions. However, in most cases the religious identity of perpetrators has been informed by a broader political agenda. The Turkish consul-general in Australia and his bodyguard were assassinated by two gunmen from the 'Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide' in Sydney in December 1980, while an unsuccessful bomb attack on the Turkish Consulate in Melbourne in 1986 killed one of the bombers from the Armenian Revolutionary Front. While Christian faith is an essential element of Armenian identity, both of these attacks were part of a broader program defined by Armenian nationalist groups who were to varying degrees advocating Turkish acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide and the creation of a Greater Armenia that would comprise parts of eastern Turkey.

The double bomb attack against the Israeli consulate and the Hakoah Club in Sydney in 1982 allegedly involved members of the Palestinian 15 May Movement, who were supported by some local accomplices, although nobody has been convicted in relation to the attacks. Once again, while religion was an element of the identity of those targeting

9   J. Oxley, *The Founding of the Tasmanian Loyalty League*, University of Tasmania Honours thesis, 1974, http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/L/Loyalty%20League.htm, accessed 12 February 2014.

both an Israeli institution and a Jewish club, their motivations were largely nationalist. Even the group's name has political rather than religious significance, given that it refers to the date on which the British mandate in Palestine ended. Of particular interest though is the way in which the Sunni Muslim members of the attack team appear to have been supported by Shi'a Muslims in Australia. The only person brought before a court over the matter—although he was granted a 'no bill' decision and his case never went to trial—was Muhammad Ali Beydoun,[10] who had been born in Bint Jbail, a Shi'a Muslim town in southern Lebanon. In this case, the Palestinian bomber's nationalist agenda coincided with those connected to southern Lebanon who sought a withdrawal of Israeli forces from the area they had invaded in 1982. Practical political agendas between Palestinian Sunnis and Lebanese Shi'a initiated the cooperative relationship that developed.

There have been other isolated examples of such secto-nationalist security threats, the best known of which were Croatian nationalists. Their Catholicism was a defining element of their Croatian identity; however, their opposition was to the Yugoslav government, which they saw as an illegitimate entity dominated by Serbs. The most significant incident involving Croatian nationalists was the alleged plans for a bombing campaign against targets in Sydney in 1978 by a group that came to be known as the 'Croatian Six'. There have been subsequent claims, however, that the whole incident was concocted by Yugoslav intelligence.[11]

Australians as foreign fighters

Prior to the current sectarian conflicts in Syria and Iraq, Australians have travelled to other people's wars in order to fight. The most well-known of them were the more than 70 Australians who fought in the Spanish civil war in the 1930s, largely as committed socialists or communists, sometimes as adventurers fighting for the Republicans and in one case, as a Catholic fighting for Franco's Nationalist forces against what he believed were Godless communists.[12] A crowd of more than 3,000 people greeted some of the returnees when they arrived back in Sydney. Unlike today's cohort of Australian 'foreign fighters' though, they were not necessarily considered a security threat to Australia on their return. This was largely due to the fact that as leftists they saw themselves as fighting against the existential threat they considered to derive from the narrow nationalist agenda of fascism. As it transpired, Australia was engaged in the same struggle against fascism within a few years.

Australians of Croatian heritage also took up arms against the Yugoslav government. The most famous incident involved a group of 15 Australians belonging to the right-wing extremist Croatian Revolutionary Brotherhood, who undertook basic military training in Australia before travelling to Germany with the rather quixotic aim of infiltrating Yugoslavia in order to initiate an anti-communist armed uprising, which they believed was ripe for development.[13] They entered Yugoslavia in 1972 with four other Croatians and began operating in the mountains of central Bosnia until they were targeted by the Yugoslav army. Over a period of several weeks, 15 were killed. Three others were subsequently executed after a trial, while one was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment.

Global Jihad and sectarianism

The global jihadist movement represents the most dangerous form of sectarian security threat. It is certainly unlike anything witnessed in the recent past, because it has eschewed the concept of the nation-state in favour of a broad religious community. National identity in this case becomes something transient at best; temporal loyalties as far as they exist are subordinated to religious identity. Unlike sectarian security threats in the past,

10 'Thirty years later police hunt for bombers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 August 2012 http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/thirty-years-later-police-hunt-for-bombers-20120825-24t5t.html, accessed 25 May 2014.

11 Hamish McDonald, 'Framed: the untold story of the Croatian six', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 February 2012, http://www.smh.com.au/national/framed-the-untold-story-about-the-croatian-six-20120210-1smum.html, accessed 26 May 2014.

12 http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bull-joseph-nugent-palmer-12827, accessed 7 July 2014.

13 Paul Hockenos, *Homeland Calling: Exile Patriotism and the Balkan Wars*, Cornell University Press, USA, 2003, p 60.

these actors do not view their religious identity as an element of a broader nationalist agenda, with the exception of groups such as ISIS, which maintain a vision of an Islamic state. National boundaries are of little import to them other than for administrative purposes; indeed in the case of ISIS they have publicly sought to redraw national boundaries. For true jihadists there is no secular agenda around which one can negotiate. In practical terms there is no real negotiable outcome.

The international jihadist movement has morphed from its beginnings in 1980s Afghanistan, when many in the West saw it as an ally in the global standoff between the two competing political ideologies of the Cold War. The piousness and strict Islamic religious interpretation of the combatants was not seen as the harbinger of a security threat to the West. To be fair, at the time the activities of the Islamist fighters appeared to be geographically contained, and the message they carried specific to a particular set of geopolitical circumstances. The West's acknowledgment that the security landscape has changed is evident in the attitude towards Islamists in the Syrian conflict: while the Assad regime is excoriated by Western and Arab governments alike, President Obama has noted that the security threat to Western interests from the crisis comes from the 'battle-hardened extremist groups'.[14]

In a generation and a half, jihadists have gone from being 'the enemy of my enemy' to simply 'the enemy'. This is due in large part to the way in which transport and communication links have allowed the exchange of people and information to occur ever more rapidly. The impact of social media in encouraging the development of a separate, idealised sectarian identity cannot be understated. In 1978 Ayatollah Khomeini was able to play on key elements of Shi'a historiography in order to mobilise large elements of the Iranian population against the Shah's government. He did this in

part through what we now see as the antediluvian method of smuggling in and copying cassette tapes with recordings of his speeches. Nowadays the proliferation of social media outlets has meant that information, including the most emotive of imagery, can be relayed nearly instantaneously to a global audience. President Obama's May 2014 West Point speech noted how the '24-hour news and social media makes it impossible to ignore the continuation of sectarian conflicts…that might have received only passing notice a generation ago.'[15] The creation of a supra-national identity has never been easier.

The Syrian and Iraqi conflicts have brought the concept of identity and sectarianism to the forefront of Australian security concerns. Although notoriously difficult to quantify accurately, there are now thousands of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. At the time of writing the government believed that there were about 60 Australians fighting and another 150 being monitored for providing support to fighters in Syria, or intending to travel there.[16] The fear, of course, is that those who travel to Syria or Iraq to fight will have gained skills that can readily be used to conduct terrorist attacks in their home countries, and even more importantly that they and support elements will have made connections with other Islamists that may be used in years to come to facilitate attacks elsewhere. This was the consequence of the Afghan foreign fighter diaspora, and security authorities are alert to the need to prevent such a reoccurrence.[17] Of equal concern is that any returnees from Syria may accrue status in their home communities for having fought in defence of Islam in countries of historical significance to the faith. Currently, more than half of the British domestic intelligence terrorism investigations conducted by MI5 involve Britons who have

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14 Transcript of President Obama's speech, *Washington Post*, 29 May 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/full-text-of-president-obamas-commencement-address-at-west-point/2014/05/28/cfbcdcaa-e670-11e3-afc6-a1dd9407abcf_story.html, accessed 6 June 2014.

15 Ibid.

16 'George Brandis flags spy law changes, pledges to protect Australia from returning jihadists', *The Australian*, 2 July 2014. http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/policy/george-brandis-flags-spy-law-changes-pledges-to-protect-australia-from-returning-jihadists/story-fn59nm2j-1226975163551, accessed 5 July 2014.

17 'FBI: Flow of foreign fighters into Syria growing', *Associated Press*, 2 May 2014, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/fbi-flow-foreign-fighters-syria-growing, accessed 6 June 2014.

travelled to Syria to fight.[18] These concerns have been heightened after a returned fighter from Syria was arrested for an attack on a Jewish Museum in Belgium in May 2014 that left three people dead.[19]

The fear regarding the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, however, is merely the latest episode of a campaign that has been ongoing for more than a decade. In Spain, for instance, since the 2004 Madrid train bombings, over 470 Islamists have been arrested.[20] In the United Kingdom, between September 2001 and August 2012 over 1,000 people who identified themselves as Muslim were arrested on terrorism-related offences, 436 of whom were charged.[21] With these figures in mind, it is little wonder that security fears about the further radicalisation of small elements of the Muslim community are widespread.

The current threat to Australians

There are two aspects to the current fear surrounding sectarian violence against Australians; the targeting of nationals abroad and the possibility of jihadists returning to their home countries to carry out attacks on targets they perceive as being representative of oppression against Muslims. The numbers of Australians currently fighting in Syria and possibly Iraq have certainly heightened that fear. It is difficult to know, however, the extent to which these jihadists fighting overseas constitute an immediate threat.

What data there is on the subject is usually drawn from a study of Thomas Hegghammer's that estimated one in nine Muslims who had participated

in religiously motivated conflict overseas returned to their country of nationality with a willingness or the intent to perpetrate attacks against the West.[22] Even this estimate was considered to be relatively loose given the reliance on open-source data and the uncertainty in determining the exact number of Western passport holders who had gone to fight overseas. Based solely on this study, the threat to Australia from Syrian returnees would appear to be slight; in absolute numbers perhaps less than 10 known fighters may harbour the intent to attack Western targets on their departure from Syria and Iraq.

The reality is that Australians are more likely to be the victim of sectarian violence overseas. In some cases, such as the 9/11 attacks, it is because they were simply caught in a mass attack on symbols of the West, symbols that are conflated with concepts of Western oppression and unbelief. In other cases, Australians have been specifically targeted because of their non-Muslim identity: Australian citizens have been killed by Indonesian Muslim extremists in the Bali and Jakarta bombings; by British-born ethnic Pakistanis in London; by Saudis in attacks on the residential compounds in Riyadh; and by Somalis in the September 2013 Westgate shopping mall attacks in Nairobi.

Solutions to this security challenge are tremendously difficult. To begin with, it is a global problem, but because it has local relevance it needs to be addressed at both levels. The relative newness of the phenomena means that there is little data to go on regarding how likely it is that Australian citizens who have decamped to Syria, Iraq or elsewhere will ever return to Australia. The research that has been completed on European foreign fighters in Syria indicates that few have any clear ambition to return to Europe once they leave, believing either that they will die as martyrs or live in the *khilafa* they believe they will establish.[23] The reality, however,

18 'MI5 focuses on British jihadists returning from Syria', *Financial Times*, 14 March 2014.

19 'Jewish museum attack: More checks on Syria fighters needed', *Flanders News*, 2 June 2006, http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.english/News/1.1986303, accessed 6 June 2014.

20 'Six terrorists arrested in Spain raids, *Agence France Press*, 30 May 2014, http://m.thelocal.es//20140530/spain-terrorist-cell-melilla-mujao-mali-lybia, accessed 1 June 2014.

21 'Terrorism arrests – analysis of charging and sentencing outcomes by religion', UK Home Office, 12 September 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/terrorism-arrests-analysis-of-charging-and-sentencing-outcomes-by-religion/terrorism-arrests-analysis-of-charging-and-sentencing-outcomes-by-religion, accessed 1 June 2014. These numbers are likely well under-reported given that religious affiliation is self-reported and there is no obligation on either the individual or authorities to report an individual's religious identity. During the same period, for example, more than 1,000 people were arrested (of whom 347 were charged) whose religion was not known.

22 Thomas Hegghammer, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting', *American Political Science Review*, February 2013, p 10.

23 'Jihad by social media', *Financial Times*, 26 March 2014, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/907fd41c-b53c-11e3-af92-00144feabdc0.html, accessed 30 May 2014.

has been somewhat different, as evidenced by the Belgian case and recent media reports that claim Australian security authorities are aware of and are monitoring 10–20 returnees. Others will inevitably return, including some about whom the security services likely will remain unaware.

One other aspect of global jihad that marks it as different from other instances of sectarian security threats is its multi-ethnic nature. Muslims who have been convicted of planning terrorist attacks in Australia—who have gone to fight in Syria, or who have come to the attention of security authorities once in the orbit of Islamic terrorist groups overseas—have come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Although dominated by those of Lebanese descent, those convicted of terrorist plots in Australia have Lebanese, Somali, Bosnian, Algerian and Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. Those known to have travelled to Syria to fight and have subsequently been killed have included Australian citizens of Lebanese and Turkish ethnicity. The two Australian citizens killed in a US drone strike in April this year—allegedly in the company of Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militants—were Anglo-Celtic converts.

In other words, their religious identity has not only overridden their national identity, it has also provided a bond between individuals of disparate ethnicities. Their primary identity is a religious one, and their motivation to attack civilian targets is based on an ideological construct in which the world is divided into believers—Muslims, but only of the schools of thought they agree with—and unbelievers, who may be killed in accordance with God's will. This type of sectarian security threat has no precedence in Australian history, and it is little wonder that it has proven difficult for the government to address. What it also means is that unless this phenomenon is properly addressed, Syria and Iraq may not be the last theatres of war that Australian Muslims feel a duty to participate in. The Middle East and North Africa have never been as open to the violent expression of one's sectarian identity as now. Given the proliferation of senior jihadist leaders who cut their teeth in sectarian struggles in the region in the 1990s, the

current situation is quite possibly spawning not only a new generation of jihadist leaders, but perhaps more importantly a new global support network.[24]

Australian governments have adopted a multi-layered approach to the issue of Australians suspected of being sectarian security risks. One element is punitive and responsive, cancelling the passports of Australian citizens wishing to travel overseas who are deemed at risk of fighting or receiving military training overseas.[25] Another element involves prosecuting people found to have participated in, or facilitated the participation of others in the Syrian conflict. Other more extreme measures have been proposed, such as cancelling the Australian citizenship of dual citizens who go overseas to fight. The Independent National Security Legislation Monitor (INSLM) has even recommended that in light of the current situation regarding foreign fighters, the entire concept of dual citizenship should be reconsidered.[26]

The second branch of government strategy has been preventative. Since 2011, more than $5 million has been allocated as part of the Building Community Resilience grants program as part of its broader Countering Violent Extremism strategy.[27] The degree to which it has succeeded depends on whether one adopts an absolute or relative measure: on the one hand the numbers of Australians who have continued to travel overseas to fight in the name of their religion would indicate that the program has failed to achieve its aim; on the other hand, without such programs its supporters could argue that the problem would be worse than it currently is.

Some commentators have suggested establishing a rehabilitation program for people returning from

24 Anthony Bubalo, *Next-gen jihad in the Middle East*, Lowy Institute for International Policy Analysis, March 2014, p 6.

25 ASIO cancels passports of Muslim men 'over jihad war fears', 8 December 2013, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-12-08/asio-cancels-passports-of-muslim-men/5142884, accessed 8 June 2014.

26 Fourth annual report of the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor, 28 March 2014, p. 51, http://www.dpmc.gov.au/INSLM/index.cfm, accessed 23 June 2014.

27 Attorney-General's Department website, http://www.ag.gov.au/NationalSecurity/Counteringviolentextremism/Pages/default.aspx, accessed 3 June 2014.

Syria after fighting there.[28] While this may have some merit, it is important that the primacy of the state and its legal foundation not only be reinforced, but be seen to be reinforced. Returnees and their facilitators should be prosecuted wherever there is enough evidence to do so. Only then can attempts at de-radicalisation and/or reintegration be instituted. While such programs sound attractive, caution should be urged as their degree of success is limited.[29] Efforts in the United Kingdom with such programs began in 2008[30] and, given the rate of arrests of Islamists planning terrorist incidents or traveling to Syria and Iraq, there is little indication that they have successfully influenced the target audience. The recidivism rate for detainees is also significant: nearly 30 percent of all detainees from Guantanamo Bay are suspected of, or confirmed to have been involved in terrorist activities after their transfer out of US custody.[31] Rehabilitation programs such as these also only target the symptoms of the problem rather than the cause.

It is the persistence even more than the scale of this sectarian security threat that poses the greatest challenge for authorities. Given that those who represent a sectarian security threat have placed their religious above their national identity, government-sponsored preventative programs will only have limited appeal. Successful efforts to delegitimise forms of religious identity and interpretation that pose a security threat come from the community as a whole, and the Islamic religious leadership in particular. Even here there are limitations though. Islam's interpretive nature and the lack of a single structured religious hierarchy, means that small groups of Muslims can forsake mainstream mosques that preach tolerance in

favour of small, secretive or makeshift prayer halls that are difficult to monitor, and within which a more aggressive brand of anti-Western religious guidance can be imparted from poorly qualified imams. Increasingly the internet also provides an online conduit for the same heterodox line of thought.

Regardless of these challenges, senior religious figures as responsible civic leaders must be both pro-active and forthright in discouraging and disputing notions that offer religious justification for putative fighters or returnees' actions, regardless of where they fought or trained, who they fought for, or what group they joined. In the battle for ideas there is no room for equivocation, whether it is by blaming radicalisation on Western governments' international policies rather than an individual's own choice, failing to repudiate claims that foreign fighters were simply providing humanitarian assistance, or supporting the idea that people who seek to join sectarian conflicts overseas are guilty of religiously misguided rather than religiously prohibited and criminal actions. Equivocation provides those who seek to influence others a point of difference between the country's secular and the community's religious leaders. By forthrightly, publicly and pro-actively delegitimising the conceptual foundations of fighting for non-state actors on religious grounds, community leaders will be seen as doing their utmost to separate religion from concepts of armed resistance.

The tardy and equivocal response of the Islamic communal leadership to the Syrian situation has not assisted government authorities. The National Imams Consultative Forum issued guidance[32] on the Syrian situation advising Australians against travelling to Syria to take part in the fighting, noting that it was against Australian law to take part in fighting with either side and that it was against Islamic law to attack civilians and non-combatants. While welcome, this statement was neither unequivocal nor timely. It advised Australians against travelling to Syria to fight, but did not forbid them, it stated that joining either side was against Australian law,

28 'Foreign Fighters in Syria and the challenges of reintegration', *ASPI Strategist*, 13 May 2014, http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/foreign-fighters-in-syria-and-the-challenges-of-reintegration/, accessed 7 June 2014.

29 'Fighting terrorism: do de-radicalisation camps really work?', *The Guardian*, 10 June 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/09/terrorism-do-deradicalisation-camps-work, accessed 7 June 2014.

30 'New plan to tackle violent extremism', *The Guardian*, 3 June 2008, http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/jun/03/uksecurity.islam, accessed 7 June 2014.

31 Spinning how many Guantanamo detainees have returned to the fight', Washington Post, 21 November 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2013/11/21/spinning-how-many-guantanamo-detainees-have-returned-to-the-fight/, accessed 7 July 2014.

32 NICF Statement regarding the Syrian crisis, http://nceis.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/969603/NICF_Statement_on_Syria_March_2014_1.pdf, accessed 31 May 2014.

but made no mention of the Islamic legal view of doing so; nor did it mention how Islamic law considered foreign fighters killing combatants in Syria. The guidance was also not issued until March 2014, over 18 months after Mustapha al-Majzoub became the first Australian killed in Syria in August 2012. Australia's Sunni mufti Sheikh Ibrahim Abu Mohammad has allegedly maintained a studied silence on the issue of people fighting in Syria,[33] and there has been no public comment on the sectarian nature of the fighting in Iraq, nor has there been an active, sustained and public condemnation of Australians who seek to travel and fight there.

In the absence of any condemnation from the mufti, or in the face of such equivocal guidance from the forum, impressionable Muslims are more likely to seek ways of supporting people who they consider to be their brethren fighting overseas. The head of the NSW Police counterterrorism unit has recently criticised the lack of understanding amongst the Australian Muslim community of the potential security threat posed by its members taking part in Syria's largely sectarian conflict.[34] The Australian National Imams Council rejected his claim.[35]

The Islamic community's religious leaders need to be alert to the reality that foreign fighters and/or facilitators have the potential to carry out or support attacks anywhere in the world that could result in the deaths of Australian citizens. They could also serve as facilitators or recruiters for future conflict in other theatres. There needs to be a concerted communal effort to engage the Australian community at the earliest stages of a conflict that may have religious overtones, and to actively discourage civilians' involvement in foreign conflicts on the basis of their religious identity. The Islamic community leadership could benefit from the development and retention of professional media skills equivalent to those

whose messages they seek to blunt. It is of limited use, for example, to rely on mosque sermons, newspaper interviews or community discussions to enjoin people not to fight in Syria when social media is awash with calls to Muslims to fight jihad. The religious counter-narrative needs to be delivered in the same forums as that of the radical narrative.

Videos of Australian Muslims fighting with ISIS and urging other Australians to fight in Syria and Iraq, and of Abu Asma al-Australi, an Australian who allegedly became a suicide bomber for Jabhat al-Nusra, serve as evocative calls to arms and have been easily obtainable on the internet. By contrast, Australia's Islamic leaders have failed to engage on social media in order to address and invalidate the religious justification of these fighters as soon as possible after they are released. Without taking a proactive stance and being prepared to fight the ideological battle publicly, in real time and in a way that confronts the Islamists' jihadist narrative, Australia's Islamic leadership has effectively vacated the social media field of battle to radical Islamists. The Islamists understand the power of technology to a far greater degree and employ it much more effectively than does the mainstream clerical leadership in Australia and elsewhere.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that the Muslim communities are very supportive of the government's efforts to prevent the spread of religious radicalism within the Muslim community. The numbers of those radicalised sufficiently or naïve enough to join militant Islamist groups and enter Syrian or other fields of battle are also small. The intra-Muslim sectarian conflict that has characterised the tensions within the Middle East and the fighting within Syria has also been largely absent from Australia, a reflection of both the nature of our immigration patterns and the attitudes of the communities themselves within Australia.

Islamic community leaders need to take advantage of the tolerance of the broader Muslim community to expedite the clearest message in as many media as possible that there is no religious justification for fighting. There can be no room for equivocal guidance or delay in countering new calls for jihad, nor of relying on older, slower and more

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33 'Muslim leaders hold closed meetings with police to discuss Syria law', http://m.abc.net.au/local/article/id/254574/c/3/p/Muslim+leaders+hold+closed +meetings+with+police+to+discuss+Syria+law, accessed 31 May 2014.

34 'Muslim community 'too lax' on jihad threat,' *The Australian*, http://www. theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/policy/muslim-community-too-lax-on-jihad-risk/story-e6frg8yo-1226935154168#, accessed 31 May 2014.

35 'Imams rap police over Syrian war allegations', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 June 2014, http://www.smh.com.au/national/imams-rap-police-over-syrian-war-allegations-20140609-39t7s.html, accessed 7 July 2014.

deliberate forms of engaging with the issue. Taking a civic as well as a religious role in guidance of the Australian Islamic community, Islamic leadership is in desperate need of understanding the media cycle and social media platforms, and of using both to debate and disown the radical religious messages that to date have been afforded an easy path.

'Geographic Australians' and future challenges

Both the persistence and seeming intractability of the problem of radical Islamist terrorism centres on the issue of identity, and it is a problem that will not easily be solved within this generation. For Western nations, and particularly for immigrant countries such as Australia, the historical difficulty of travel and the limited methods by which information could travel meant that communities could largely be protected from the security impact of external conflicts. People who may have fled ethnic or sectarian conflict to travel to Australia were forced to distance themselves from it, and learned about events in their country of origin after time delay through print, talking by phone to relatives or friends, or perhaps as a result of television footage. In the current age of instantaneous communications, it is much easier for people to maintain contact with events in their country of origin or that of their parents, and to see near-instantaneous images of conflict.

This has led some senior national security officials involved in counterterrorism to talk about the emergence of 'geographic Australians'; those who live in the country and take advantage of the services that it provides, but who hold an identity that is at odds and occasionally in conflict with secular Australia. The proliferation of social media and consequent speed of information flows has meant that it is increasingly easy to become a 'geographic Australian'. This applies to small sections of the Islamic community, the members of which, like millions of immigrants before them, tend to cluster in linguistic or ethnically similar areas. Unlike many other groups, however, there are low rates of exogamous marriages among Muslim families. Such interfaith marriages largely break down communal barriers and soften communal

identity and, as demographers have found, 'may be considered a sign of advanced secularization.'[36] Muslim communities have the lowest rate of interfaith marriage in Australia, although this should be tempered by the fact that, while rates of exogamous marriage increase with second and third-generation immigrants, there were relatively smaller numbers of these within the Muslim community at the time of the 2006 census, on which the figures are based.

Regardless, ready access to social media allied with geographic insularity and endogamous marriage patterns can provide an atmosphere in which anti-Western radicalism develops amongst this sub-strata of the Islamic community. Particularly for those with a relatively poor level of secular education, a lack of contestability of ideas from interaction with broader society, and disconnection from the host country, through reliance on social media individuals can construct a narrative in which they believe there is a global assault on their religion that they are ideologically bound to defend. For some that may mean a desire to travel to foreign battlefronts; for others it means a desire to fight the 'near enemy' at home. For both it represents a potential security challenge for the host country.

It is likely that over time demographic changes will alter the Muslim community's marriage patterns and make interfaith and interethnic marriages increasingly common. On the other hand, the increasingly easy access to uncontextualised social media will continue to act as a means by which disaffected, religiously observant youth can immerse themselves in what they perceive to be a viable, antagonistic alternative to secular society. Attempting to avoid the long-term security implications of 'geographic Australians' is further justification for communal and religious leaders to be proactive in providing counter-narratives to those readily available to individuals who have yet to integrate fully into the society in which they live.

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36 Genevieve Heard, Siew-Ean Khoo & Bob Birrell, *Intermarriage in Australia: patterns by birthplace, ancestry, religion and indigenous status*, Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, June 2009, p. 30, http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/cpur/files/2012/09/intermarriage-report.pdf, accessed 31 May 2014.

The future

Fears of sectarian security threats and instances of Australians travelling overseas to fight in civil wars or for non-state actors are not new in Australian experience. The current type of security threat, however, is qualitatively different from those of the past. Australia's experience with sectarianism was previously one in which religious affiliation comprised part of a broader—usually nationalist—identity. The sectarian conflict that past Australians have confronted essentially concerned unresolved borders and issues of political representation. Frequently issues of religious affiliation were about issues of political rather than religious ideology.

Despite the government's recognition of the threat that radical Islamism represents for Australians both at home and abroad, the programs that it has instituted have failed to address the issue adequately. More than a decade after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, the threat not only persists but has grown. Australian citizens have continued to pursue the chimera of a religiously motivated but unachievable outcome through the use of violence. Due largely to the situation in Syria and now Iraq, there are likely more Australians who have had contact with—and training by—militant Islamic groups than there were before the so-called Global War on Terror began.

Most Australians who have fought in Syria have no Syrian ancestry, and many are not ethnically Arab. They have no links with the country except for the belief that they share a religious identity demanding that they take up arms to protect their own 'imagined community' community. The concern for Australian authorities is that this 'imagined community' is not confined to Syria or Iraq and that they may return to Australia to undertake terrorist actions, or to support like-minded individuals or groups in launching operations in other countries that target what they perceive to be non-Muslim interests.

Solutions to this are not easy. To begin with, the government and communal leadership must identify ways in which to protect its citizens against a sectarian threat that has killed more than 100 of

them over the past 13 years, and plotted attacks in Australia. The stronger legislative measures that are being touted are a good start but they are punitive and do nothing to address the ideological motivation for people to pursue a radical path. The persistence of the threat indicates that punitive and government preventative measures (even more rigorous ones) alone are by themselves insufficient.

One thing that the Syrian issue has demonstrated is that people's access to information around which they can construct an identity that allows them to disengage from mainstream thought has never been greater. As a consequence, Muslim community leaders have the greatest responsibility for defeating the ideological component that is fuelling the threat to Australian nationals. If the secular government and its policy approach to conflicts that involve Muslim populations have already been delegitimised in the perceptions of militant Islamists, then it is left to the sectarian leadership to engage vigorously—via all platforms and at the earliest opportunity—to delegitimise participation in conflict not sanctioned by the state. While intra-communal spillover from distant conflict appears to have been dealt with in a responsible and professional way by community leaders, in the case of Syria and Iraq it is reasonable to say that the Islamic counter-narrative that has been publicly disseminated by the community's leadership has been too little in too few communications media, and demonstrably too late. The community's leadership appears to be fighting this twenty-first century ideological battle with a twentieth-century approach.

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