

## ‘Team Australia’ reacts to domestic terrorism

By John Bruni

Taking precautions to prevent potential threats of domestic terrorism in Australia is nothing new. Ever since ‘9/11’ and the Bali bombings of 2002, Australia, at the state and federal level, has taken reasonable legislative and operational measures designed to pre-empt an attack on mainland Australia. Reasonable measures to ensure public safety are always welcome and it would be foolish of any Western government to suppose that a risk to public safety in these volatile times is impossible. Take for instance the number of terrorist plots that have been foiled by Australian authorities that, had warnings been ignored or treated nonchalantly, could have manifested into something truly significant. There were the cases of:



Figure 1 'Sydney Five'

- **2003:** Faheed Khalid Lodhi (Pakistani-born) who planned to trigger jihadist violence in Australia by targeting Sydney’s electricity grid as well as local military installations.

- **2003:** Mohammed Abderrahman (also known as Willie Brigitte), a French Al Qaeda recruit who married a former signaller in the Australian Army whom he interrogated for her knowledge of the Australian Army. The marriage lasted 6 weeks before immigration officials deported him back to France where he was charged with terrorist-related activities and is currently serving time in a French prison.
- **2005:** Khaled Cheikho, Moustafa Cheikho, Mohamed Ali Elomar, Abdul Rakib Hasan, and Mohammed Omar Jamal (The Sydney Five), who between 2004-05 allegedly plotted to commit terrorist acts within Sydney. Among their possessions police found militant Islamist literature, weapons and ammunition. In one of Australia’s longest trials, the Sydney Five were eventually found guilty of terrorist related offenses and were jailed in early 2010, with sentences ranging between 23-28 years.
- **2005:** The Benbrika Group, led by Algerian-born Muslim cleric resident in Melbourne, Abu Nacer Benbrika who, along with 16 others, was arrested in 2005 for terrorist offenses. The Benbrika Group was allegedly also connected to the Sydney Five and police investigations uncovered that, together, they planned to coordinate attacks in Sydney and Melbourne. Benbrika apparently wanted to attack sporting fixtures, train stations and assassinate then Prime Minister John Howard for Australia’s involvement in the 2003 Iraq War and Iraq’s subsequent occupation. In 2008, Benbrika was charged with being a

leader and member of a terrorist organization and was sentenced to 15 years jail.

- **2009:** The Holsworthy Barracks plot. Four men, linked to the Somali-based terrorist group al-Shabab, planned on attacking the Holsworthy Army Barracks in Melbourne with automatic weapons. In 2011 three of the perpetrators were sentenced to 18 years in prison and one was acquitted.
- **2014:** September 18, AFP/NSW/QLD 'high profile' police raids involving 800 officers in 25 locations across Sydney and Brisbane arrested 15 people, charging one with unspecified terrorist offenses.
- **2014:** September 23, 18-year-old Numan Haider (of Afghan ethnic origin), a known 'person of interest' to police for holding extremist views, walked into a Melbourne police station and attacked two officers with a knife, seriously wounding them. He was shot dead.
- **2014:** September 29, it was announced that Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop cancelled the passports of 50 Australians on 'national security' grounds; ostensibly to prevent these people from travelling to fight for the Islamic State.
- **2014:** September 30, AFP/Victorian Police raids were conducted across five suburbs in Melbourne, uncovering a network of people involved in funding terrorist activity. At the time of writing, one person has been charged after the American FBI tipped off Australian authorities.

So, what do the abovementioned incidents prove? They prove that in each case existing

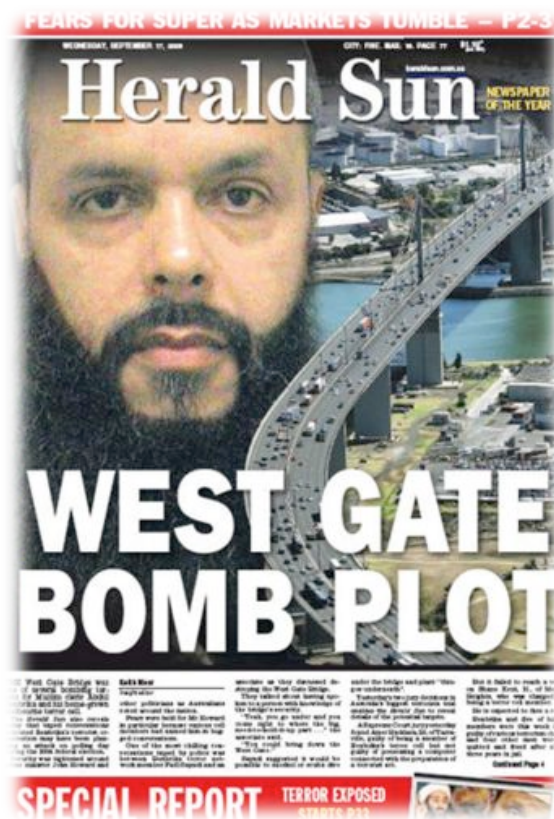


Figure 2 Benbrika

counter-terrorism laws were strong enough to foil the alleged intent of a terrorist attack. They also prove that there are people residing in our national community who seek to carry out political violence in Australia on behalf of groups they sympathise with in foreign countries. Why? For one thing, Australia's confederal relationship with the United States through the ANZUS Treaty. Modern Australia (i.e. post-1945), while a sovereign entity on paper, traditionally volunteers to lock step with American strategic and foreign policies. Doing so secures Australia's place under the American strategic umbrella. But,

in a multicultural context (i.e. post-1971), this also increases the ire of those from various confessional faiths or ethnic backgrounds who are not enamoured with American or Australian social norms and behaviours. Compounding this is that many such individuals may feel disenfranchised from the national economy, socially isolated, and vilified by the Anglo-Celtic mainstream, resulting in a downward spiral of substance abuse, petty crime, self loathing and loathing for ‘the system’ that ‘made them this way’. They feel aggrieved. On the fringe, however, where you add to this mix emotional or psychological instability, ‘turning inward’ is phase one of a process toward reinventing one’s purpose in life. This comes in many forms. Often it manifests in the discovery or re-discovery of religion and through this gives them a sense of belonging. Radicalisation generally, but not always, comes from this process of personal reinvention.



**Figure 3 Holsworthy Army Barracks plotters**

If a person is ‘radicalised’, their desire to partake in or effectively create the conditions for political violence is set. However, as in the attempts summarized earlier, they lack the ability to ‘fly under the

radar’ of intelligence surveillance. Radicals are generally outsiders within their own communities. They revel in showing their open disdain for the system they live under. They will watch provocative videos and openly use the Internet to ‘chatter’ with fellow travellers in the full knowledge that they are leaving an open door to successful electronic eavesdropping. They will gather with their confederates, sometimes openly, leaving their identities and their motives transparent to friends, family as well as intelligence agencies.

One can make the argument that local radicals’ ambitions will almost always exceed their capabilities. A case in point was the gruesome hacking death of British soldier, Lee Rigby outside of the Royal Artillery Barracks at Woolwich, London in 2013. British intelligence and police had been greatly fortified since the 2005 terrorist attacks in London. So much so, that local and foreign radicals find it difficult to move in the British urban space without being detected, and by extension, their ability to carry out a kinetic terrorist attack (i.e. the use of assault weapons or explosives) in a British city has been largely curtailed. Local radicals (of Nigerian decent) did manage to innovate terrorism by murdering a soldier in full view of the public. The public, armed with phones with in-built cameras and linked to social media sites managed to rapidly disseminate this atrocity. It was a highly innovative ‘low-tech’ attack. But it was an attack on one unfortunate man. The perpetrators of the attack did not go into the crowd of onlookers to continue the carnage,

and the perpetrators were easily contained. Arguably the fact that this attack took place, said more about British intelligence being blind-sided to the possibility of such innovation – an intelligence failure by any other name. But the ability of other local radicals to imitate this style of assault in other Western countries has been found wanting. Obviously as terrorism innovates, so too does counter-terrorism.

Much has been made recently by the Australian government regarding potential ‘local jihadists’ who left Australia to receive military training and experience fighting for the so-called Islamic State. The government’s concern is that these now ‘trained’ fighters may stage a terrorist incident upon their return home. It is true that those who have been identified as directly aiding and abetting the Islamic State may pose an increased terrorist risk if allowed back into the country – in theory. This would mean that Australian authorities had lost touch with such individuals and had no way of apprehending and detaining them before they could set off a terrorist incident. It would also amount to an intelligence failure, pure and simple. Assuming the likelihood of Australian ‘foreign fighters’ returning home undetected, the question is, would they, if physically and mentally whole, want to re-create the conditions of conflict? There may indeed be a few who would be motivated to create havoc, but their numbers and organisational capabilities would be severely limited. They too, in spite of their more seasoned combat experience vis a vis local radicalised novices would

have to run the gauntlet of Australian intelligence agencies, while silently moving among sectarian and ethnic communities in order to find willing recruits and create a financial base to deliver their terrorist blow.

In the end, the greatest terrorist threat against Australian interests comes from overseas in national settings where intelligence and policing services are underfunded; organisational settings where there is little or no interagency communication or cooperation, and where there are existing, long-standing insurgencies or anti-government violence. This precondition is important because long-standing insurgencies create the conditions of sustained organised political violence on the ground – a condition that thankfully does not exist in first world developed states such as the US, Canada, the UK, France, much of continental Western Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. So should we in Australia be driven by moral panic about terrorists in our midst? No. The best counter-terrorism is conducted in the shadows, away from the front pages and the gaze of social media. In our increasingly fragile multicultural setting, a moral panic over public displays of counter-terrorism does little to persuade the general public about its ongoing safety. It does, however, play to a desire by some political parties to be seen to present a tough, ‘in control’ image in the face of failed foreign and strategic initiatives. Ultimately though it plays to the baser nature of our hidden biases against confessional and ethnic

plurality, fraying the seams of multiculturalism for no clear gain.

*– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –*

Images Accessed: 30/09/2014

**Sydney Five image**

<http://resources2.news.com.au/images/2013/07/11/1226677/611458-terrorism-accused.jpg>

**Benbrika image**

<http://www.crikey.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Media/images/080917-herald-sun-510be9b7-1b2d-471c-a3fa-44efd92a2430.jpg>

**Holsworthy Army Barracks plotters image**

<http://resources0.news.com.au/images/2011/12/16/1226224/422256-wissam-mahmoud-fattal.jpg>