



ANALYSIS

Australian foreign fighters: Risks and responses

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conflicts in Syria and Iraq have attracted aspiring jihadists from across the world. Australians have joined the flow of foreign fighters to the region, raising concerns that some will carry out terrorist attacks in Australia should they return home. The record of past jihadist foreign fighter mobilisations, including Australia's own history in this regard, demonstrates that there is a potential threat to Australia's security. However, a range of factors will shape that threat, including how Australia responds to returning foreign fighters.

The Government's response has mainly focused on increased resources and powers for police and intelligence agencies, but also includes an important non-coercive element termed Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) that has received less attention. CVE has been a core element of the global response to foreign fighters, and has played a role in Australia's counter-terrorism approach for several years. However, many past CVE measures are not directly suitable for the current situation. Australia can learn valuable lessons from European countries, which have more experience in CVE and are already using such measures to address the current foreign fighter threat.

Conflicts in the Middle East are reinvigorating an international terrorist threat that was thought to be in decline just a few years ago. The Syrian civil war has attracted foreign fighters from across the world, exacerbated tensions in the region, and prompted the emergence of a new al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. This has led to renewed violence in Iraq and the rise of the self-described Islamic State (IS), which now competes with al-Qaeda for leadership of global jihadism.

Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, jihadist groups have expressed allegiance to IS and carried out violence in its name. The danger goes beyond the surrounding region, with governments across Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America concerned that their citizens who have joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq will pose a threat once back at home. Europe has already experienced multiple terrorist plots by returned fighters from Syria, allegedly including the murders of four people at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in May 2014. Although the siege at the Lindt Café in Sydney in December 2014 was not perpetrated by a foreign fighter, it underlined the return of the terrorist threat to Western countries.

Australians have joined this flow of foreign fighters, raising fears that they will return with dangerous skills and violent intent. The Australian Government recently described this as its “number-one national security priority.” In response to the threat, the Government has joined the US-led military coalition against IS, provided \$630 million in extra funding to intelligence and security agencies, and introduced extensive new counter-terrorism legislation. The Government’s response also includes a softer element, in the form of a renewed Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) effort. This term refers to non-coercive efforts to dissuade involvement in terrorist activity, and has been an important, if less prominent, aspect of the global response to the foreign fighter problem. In September 2014, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 called upon all member states to enhance their CVE approaches, and, in February 2015, the United States hosted an international summit to build upon these efforts.

This Analysis examines the risks posed by Australians joining jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, and the ability of CVE measures to address these risks. It first examines the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters, and Australia’s own history of foreign fighter activity, to assess the threat facing Australia. It then examines Australia’s CVE response to find what can be learned from past CVE approaches and from international experiences.

This Analysis argues that the foreign fighter mobilisation in Syria and Iraq does pose a serious national security threat to Australia, but it also

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identifies factors that would diminish the threat. In particular, it argues that the threat will, in large part, be determined by the way in which Australia responds to aspiring and returning foreign fighters. While punitive measures are often necessary, CVE measures also need to be a core element of the response. However, many past CVE measures are not directly suitable for addressing the foreign fighter threat. Instead, Australia can learn valuable lessons from European countries, which have more experience in CVE and are already using such measures.

JIHADIST FOREIGN FIGHTERS

The term ‘foreign fighters’ refers to people who join insurgencies outside of their countries of residence.¹ It covers not only those who engage in combat, but also those who travel to a conflict zone to train with an insurgent group or provide some form of assistance.² Historically, the most famous example is the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. Today, the term is commonly associated with volunteers from the Muslim diaspora who have joined conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, often fighting for jihadist groups. Jihadism refers to violent manifestations of Islamism, while Islamism refers to the use of Islam as a political ideology.³

The first major manifestation of this occurred after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Key jihadist ideologues, most famously Abdullah Azzam, called for Muslims across the world to travel to Afghanistan and fight against the Soviets.⁴ Thousands took up this call during the 1980s. Although they only played a marginal role in the war, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989 was taken as a vindication of the foreign fighter mobilisation. In sympathetic circles, it was seen as an example of true believers coming together to repel and destroy an aggressive superpower. Subsequent conflicts saw similar foreign fighter mobilisations, on varying scales, with fewer than 100 travelling to the Philippines in the 1990s, over 1000 to Bosnia in the 1990s, and around 5000 to Iraq in the mid-2000s.⁵

These mobilisations resulted in violence well outside of recognised conflict zones. Veterans of the Afghan–Soviet conflict returned to Egypt and Algeria and took part in attempts to overthrow the ruling regimes. Several Indonesians who fought in Afghanistan during the 1980s went on to play leading roles in the formation of Jemaah Islamiyah and were behind attacks such as the 2002 Bali bombings.⁶ Al-Qaeda itself was formed, in part, from Saudi and Egyptian veterans of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Returned foreign fighters have also been the instigators of many jihadist terror plots within Europe, North America, and Australia. Thomas Hegghammer’s study of all known jihadist plots in Western countries between 1990 and 2010 found that 46 per cent involved foreign fighters.⁷ Moreover, those plots that involved foreign fighters were more likely to result in fatalities.⁸ This is consistent with research conducted by Marc Sageman and Paul Cruickshank that also

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found that plots were more likely to succeed if some of the conspirators had fought or trained abroad.⁹

Consequently, governments across the world are greatly concerned about the current cohort of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. This most recent example of the phenomenon began when the Assad regime in Syria suppressed protests occurring as part of the Arab Spring in 2011, igniting an insurgency with a jihadist element. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states backed the insurgents, who are overwhelmingly Sunni, as is the majority of Syria's population. Iran and Hezbollah backed the Assad regime, primarily made up of Alawites, a Shia-derived Muslim sect. This sectarian dimension contrasts with earlier jihadist foreign fighter mobilisations, which tended to be against perceived external occupiers of Muslim land. The civil war has prompted the growth of a new al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, which now controls substantial territory in Syria. It has also enabled the rise of IS, which grew out of al-Qaeda's former affiliate in Iraq. IS has seized extensive territory in both Iraq and Syria, declared itself a 'caliphate', and now overshadows al-Qaeda in its appeal to aspiring foreign fighters.¹⁰

The conflict threatens international security in multiple ways. It has heightened sectarian tensions across the region, most notably in Lebanon, which has seen repeated outbreaks of violence in its major cities. Jihadist groups in the Middle East and North Africa have expressed allegiance to IS and carried out bombings and kidnappings in its name.¹¹ No earlier conflict has generated as large a jihadist foreign fighter mobilisation as quickly, with current estimates of up to 20 000 fighters.¹² The global scale of the Syria-Iraq mobilisation is unprecedented, having attracted foreign fighters from over 80 countries.¹³ This mobilisation also has a far greater online dimension than any during the 1990s or 2000s, making it easier for participants to spread propaganda, share advice and skills, and inspire others to join.¹⁴ It is further distinguished by its strong appeal within Western countries; over 3000 Westerners are estimated to have joined.¹⁵

A major concern for Western governments is that these fighters will return and carry out terrorist attacks at home. In May 2014, a gunman who allegedly had returned from training with IS in Syria murdered four people at the Jewish Museum of Belgium. The incident was only unusual in that the attack was successful; in Europe, Syria returnees have been involved in around ten alleged jihadist plots so far.¹⁶ The Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, in January 2015, is another example of the foreign fighter threat. While the perpetrators are not known to have fought in Syria or Iraq, one of them is believed to have trained in Yemen with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and the shooting was followed by an attack on a Kosher supermarket by an IS supporter.¹⁷

Despite the seriousness of the threat, it does not follow that most foreign fighters attempt attacks on return. In fact, very few do. In his study of

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foreign fighters, Hegghammer found that only up to one in nine jihadist foreign fighters from Western countries later became involved in terror plots within the West, and that even this was likely to be an overestimate.¹⁸ Similarly, a study by Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn found that only a very small portion of Western jihadist fighters returned to carry out attacks.¹⁹ This leaves governments with a seemingly paradoxical problem: most foreign fighters do not prove a threat on return, but those who do are highly dangerous and have been involved in a substantial proportion of the domestic jihadist plots in the West, including the most serious attacks such as the 2005 London bombings. This raises the question of what distinguishes the many returned foreign fighters who do not pose a domestic threat from the few who do.

FACTORS THAT SHAPE THE THREAT

In the past, attacks by foreign fighters on Western targets were often carried out at the behest of al-Qaeda and like-minded organisations. When aspiring fighters arrived in training camps in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in the late 1990s, few had the intention of attacking the West.²⁰ Most of the camps were not directly run by al-Qaeda and trainees mainly learned conventional military skills.²¹ However, al-Qaeda used its influence over the training process to develop operatives for its global war. Osama bin Laden and other senior leaders lavished attention on selected recruits, drew them into their inner circle and persuaded them that the greatest enemy of Muslims was the 'Crusader-Zionist Alliance'. Once persuaded and prepared, these recruits were dispatched for attacks.²² Infamously, several of the 9/11 hijackers initially travelled to Afghanistan to train to fight in Chechnya, but were redirected to attack the United States.²³ This strategy of redirecting foreign fighters to attack on Western soil continued after al-Qaeda's senior leadership relocated to Pakistan from Afghanistan following Operation Enduring Freedom.

The extent to which particular jihadist organisations see foreign fighters as a resource to use in attacking the West will play a major role in shaping the threat.²⁴ For al-Qaeda, some Pakistan-based groups close to al-Qaeda (such as Lashkar e-Toiba, Islamic Jihad Union, and Tehrik-i-Taliban), and the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, attacks against the West have been a key strategic focus. In contrast, almost none of the Westerners who travelled to fight for al-Shabaab in Somalia, or al-Qaeda in Iraq in the mid-2000s, returned to carry out attacks. Al-Shabaab has overwhelmingly focused on local and regional targets, and while it became a formal affiliate of al-Qaeda in 2012 and may now have a greater strategic interest in attacking the West, it has become less hospitable to foreign fighters due to internal power struggles.²⁵ For al-Qaeda in Iraq during the mid-2000s, its local battles (particularly against Iraq's Shia population) were a much greater strategic priority and foreign fighters were mainly used as cannon fodder and suicide bombers within the conflict zone.²⁶

In the case of foreign fighters in Syria or Iraq, gauging the actual extent of the threat is far from simple. Since September 2014, IS has explicitly and repeatedly called for attacks within Western countries. Jabhat al-Nusra, as a formal al-Qaeda affiliate, also has an interest in attacking the West, and has reportedly attempted to do so with the establishment of the Syria-based 'Khorasan Group': senior al-Qaeda figures tasked with organising attacks on Western targets.²⁷ However, there is little evidence that either IS or Jabhat al-Nusra has yet used foreign fighters for attacks in the West, even as IS has taken credit for attacks carried out by its supporters in France, the United States, Canada, and Australia.²⁸ This contrasts with how al-Qaeda's senior leadership saw Western passports as a treasured resource, trained selected recruits specifically for attacks in the West, and provided directions and logistical support.²⁹ Jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq have a range of other uses for their international volunteers, such as combat, suicide bombings, and propaganda videos; technical skills are especially valued (IS has made appeals for doctors, engineers, and computer scientists to serve the self-proclaimed Caliphate).³⁰ However, this could easily change if either IS or Jabhat al-Nusra were to adjust their strategic priorities.

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An organisation's strategic priorities do not alone account for all cases of jihadist foreign fighters turning to domestic attacks. Several foreign fighters have initiated domestic plots without direct instigation by groups like al-Qaeda. Examples of this include an Afghan-trained cell that plotted an attack on the Strasbourg Christmas market in 2000; a Chechen-trained cell that plotted attacks on the Russian embassy in Paris in 2002; the Hofstad Group, which operated in the Netherlands in 2003–06; and the Toronto 18 plot of 2006.³¹ This suggests that there are other factors influencing the propensity of returned foreign fighters to launch domestic attacks that still need to be identified.

Some research indicates that those who train with jihadist groups are more likely to pose a terrorist threat on return than those who actually fight on the frontlines. Van Zuijdewijn's study of Western jihadist foreign fighters involved in European terror plots found that two-thirds had trained, while only one-third had actually engaged in combat.³² A study by Jonathan Githens-Mazer on UK foreign fighters supports this. His research found that many jihadist combat veterans often went quiet on return or actively discouraged others from becoming involved, while some particularly dangerous returnees had not made it to the frontlines.³³ There are parallels with the involvement of former US military personnel in far-right extremist groups. Research has found that they tended to have had short-lived and unsuccessful military careers, suggesting that those most likely to turn to violent extremism once back home may be those who feel they have more to prove.³⁴ By contrast, exposure to combat increases the likelihood of a foreign fighter becoming disillusioned or indeed being injured or killed.

Another factor shaping the threat of returning foreign fighters is how they perceive the conflict politically and whether they draw parallels with their own circumstances upon return.³⁵ For example, foreign fighters in Syria who perceive themselves as simply defending an oppressed population from a local tyrant may not be inclined to carry out violence on return. However, if they view the Syrian conflict as just one theatre in a broader global war the West is waging on Islam, they may be more inclined to carry out violence on return. Once engaged in a foreign conflict, their experiences can change how they think about their role in a wider political context. For example, Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan-American who plotted to attack New York's subway system, has said that he was motivated by his increased awareness, while training in Pakistan, of civilian deaths caused by US drone strikes.³⁶ Changes in how a foreign fighter perceives the conflict, and who they regard as a legitimate target of violence, can also result from increased exposure to propaganda and from the bonds formed while training or fighting, which can create a greater emotional stake in continuing the struggle elsewhere. Given that many Western countries are now directly involved in military action against IS, an increasing number of fighters may be likely to view their circumstances through the frame of a global war. This places Australia in a dangerous situation. Many Australian citizens have joined the Syria-Iraq mobilisation, Australia has contributed to military action against IS, and the country has repeatedly been named as a target by IS.

AUSTRALIAN JIHADIST FOREIGN FIGHTERS

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This is not the first time that Australians have joined jihadist groups abroad. Like many other Western countries, Australia has had a persistent, although relatively minor, history of jihadist foreign fighter activity. The author developed a dataset of reported Australian jihadist foreign fighters, summarised in the table below.³⁷ These figures understate the true extent of Australian foreign fighter activity, as they only include identifiable individuals.³⁸ This can be seen by comparing this data with the official estimates: the table lists 18 reported cases of Australians engaged in jihadist activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) has estimated that 30 Australians "travelled to Afghanistan or Pakistan between 1990 and 2010 to train at extremist camps and/or fight with extremists."³⁹ Similarly, the table lists 54 reported cases of Australians joining jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria, which falls well short of ASIO estimates. This data provides as comprehensive an overview of Australian jihadist foreign fighter activity as open sources allow, but does not represent the totality of this activity.⁴⁰

Destination	Foreign fighter cases	Main years of activity
Afghanistan	9	Late 1990s to 2001
Pakistan	9	Late 1990s to 2003
Lebanon	16	2002 onwards
Somalia	4	2006 to 2009
Yemen	7	2006 onwards
Syria	44	2012 onwards
Iraq	10	2014 onwards
Miscellaneous	6	1990s onwards
Total foreign fighter cases	105	
Overlaps	7	
Total foreign fighters	98	

There was no clear information on Australians fighting against the Soviets in Afghanistan, or in the foreign fighter mobilisations of the early 1990s such as Bosnia. There are indications that some Australians may have joined these mobilisations but nothing solid enough for inclusion.⁴¹ By the late 1990s, small numbers of Australians were travelling to train in Afghanistan and Pakistan, mainly with al-Qaeda and Lashkar e-Toiba (LeT). The bulk of the Afghan travel came to an end with Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, and most of the Pakistan travel ended in 2003 when various facilitator networks were shut down. Over the next ten years, the main destinations for Australian foreign fighters were Lebanon, Somalia, and Yemen. Lebanon was the most persistently popular destination, with Australians involved with Asbat al-Ansar in the early 2000s, Fatah al-Islam in 2007, and Syria-focused groups more recently. From 2006, several Australians joined the Somali-based jihadist group al-Shabaab following Ethiopia's invasion, but this appears to have dissipated following the disruption of a support network in Melbourne and al-Shabaab's dramatically reduced popularity in the Somali diaspora. A small number of Australians have been involved in jihadist activity in Yemen, and recently two Australians suspected of being members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula were confirmed killed in a US drone strike. From 2012 onwards, the Syrian civil war sparked a larger mobilisation of Australian foreign fighters than any of these earlier conflicts.

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Comparing Australia's jihadist foreign fighter history with the studies conducted by Hegghammer, Cruickshank, and others, some distinctive features stand out. The first is the consistency with which Australia's domestic jihadist plots have been linked to foreign fighter activity. For example, Australia's first jihadist plot involved Jack Roche, who travelled to Afghanistan in 2000 and was persuaded by senior al-Qaeda figures to return and collect intelligence for an intended bombing campaign against Israeli and Jewish targets across Australia.⁴² Similarly, in 2003, there was a failed jihadist plot involving Faheem Lodhi, a Sydney man who had trained with LeT in Pakistan, and Willie Brigitte, a French LeT trainee.⁴³ In 2005, a major counter-terrorism operation termed Operation Pendennis disrupted two jihadist cells in Sydney and Melbourne. One member of the Melbourne cell had trained with Jaish e-Mohammed in Pakistan and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001, and multiple members of the Sydney cell had trained with LeT in Pakistan.⁴⁴ In 2009, police and security agencies foiled a plot to carry out a mass shooting at the Holsworthy army barracks in Sydney. This plot also had foreign fighter connections, as the men were in close communication with the Somali jihadist group al-Shabaab and had dispatched at least two individuals to train with them, one of whom returned and was closely associated with the plotters.⁴⁵ As noted earlier, Hegghammer found that foreign fighters were involved in 46 per cent of all the jihadist terror plots within the West between 1990 and 2010. In contrast, all of Australia's jihadist terror plots during that time period featured the involvement of at least one foreign fighter. Current concerns about those returning from Syria and Iraq are based not only on events abroad but on Australia's own experiences with returnees.

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A second feature is that until 2012, most Australian foreign fighters were not involved in actual combat. In Afghanistan and Pakistan they tended only to train, and in Lebanon and Yemen they tended to be involved in support activities such as facilitation. This differs from Europe and the United States, which have had many cases of jihadists engaging in combat long before 2012.⁴⁶ However, the Syria-Iraq mobilisation has prompted a shift. Australian jihadists in Syria and Iraq are not simply attending training camps, but are often fighting, and dying, on the frontlines.

Third, Australia is unusual in that Lebanon features so heavily in its foreign fighter history. At least 16 Australians appear to have been involved in jihadist activity in Lebanon, whereas Lebanon rarely features prominently as a foreign fighter destination for other Western countries. That Australian jihadist foreign fighting activity has strong historical links with Lebanon gives the conflict in Syria greater relevance for potential Australian jihadists than insurgencies elsewhere. Lebanon is increasingly being dragged into the conflict, with both sides recruiting fighters from Syria's fragile neighbour, and carrying out bombings and kidnappings in Tripoli and Beirut.⁴⁷ Australia-Lebanon jihadist

connections create another way for Australians to join the conflict zone, without having to rely on the Syrian–Turkish border for entry.

A final feature is that few of Australia's aspiring jihadists travelled to Pakistan after 2003. By contrast, hundreds of non-Australian Westerners travelled to train or fight with jihadist groups in Pakistan during this time.⁴⁸ As Pakistan was the greatest source of externally guided jihadist plots in the West during the 2000s, largely due to the presence of al-Qaeda, the lack of aspiring Australian jihadists travelling to Pakistan during this period resulted in a lower security threat. Australia was fortunate that the destination countries for Australian jihadists during the 2000s, namely Lebanon and Somalia, were somewhat peripheral to the global jihad. However, the Syria-Iraq mobilisation has changed this.

THE CURRENT FOREIGN FIGHTER THREAT TO AUSTRALIA

Australians have been involved in the Syrian conflict since at least 2012, and their activity has increasingly become a cause for serious concern. They first tended to join groups that loosely came under the Free Syrian Army rubric, then many joined al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, and in the past two years many have joined IS and have been fighting in both Syria and Iraq.⁴⁹ ASIO has estimated that, as of February 2015, around 90 Australians were fighting for jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, that up to 30 have returned, and that over 20 have died.⁵⁰ Several have appeared in propaganda videos for Jabhat al-Nusra and IS, three are believed to have carried out suicide bombings, and some Australians are occupying leadership positions.⁵¹ Some have also boasted of war crimes, and explicitly threatened Australia.⁵²

However, judging from some of the factors discussed earlier, the returning foreign fighter threat to Australia may not turn out to be as great as feared. So far, neither Jabhat al-Nusra nor IS appear to have made attacks in the West as high a strategic priority as al-Qaeda's senior leadership did, and they have a wide range of other uses for foreign recruits. This contrasts with the situation when Australians travelled to South Asia to train with al-Qaeda and LeT at the turn of the century. Al-Qaeda was prioritising attacks within the West, devoting substantial resources to this purpose, and LeT was actively assisting this effort.⁵³

Past cases indicate that those foreign fighters who receive training but see little actual combat tend to be more likely to attempt attacks on return than jihadist combat veterans. Combat experience increases their likelihood of foreign fighters becoming disillusioned, killed, or coming to the awareness of Australian authorities. In that respect it would be more concerning for domestic security if Australians were quietly training in Syria and Iraq and returning home unnoticed, as happened with many who trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Moreover, a decade ago

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Australia's security services were far less prepared for terror plots than they are today, having gained dramatically increased funding, powers, staff, and counter-terrorism experience.

Therefore, while the scale and seriousness of the Syria-Iraq mobilisation greatly exceeds any of Australia's earlier jihadist mobilisations, suggesting a greatly increased threat, the actual threat may prove less than feared. Apart from any decisions by IS to use foreign fighters for terrorist attacks abroad, much will depend on how many return, what their intentions are, what activities they undertake on return, and what influence they have on like-minded individuals. Importantly, this can be influenced by how Australia responds.

AUSTRALIA'S RESPONSE TO THE FOREIGN FIGHTER THREAT

The Australian Government has described the foreign fighter threat as its "number-one national security priority"⁵⁴ and raised the National Terrorism Public Alert from medium to high in September 2014.⁵⁵ The Government has provided \$630 million in extra funding, over four years, to the Australian Federal Police (AFP), ASIO, and other agencies,⁵⁶ and introduced extensive new national security legislation. Authorities have cracked down on suspected recruitment networks and plots and have used controversial powers such as Preventative Detention Orders and Control Orders. One widely used measure has been passport confiscation, with ASIO cancelling 45 passports in the last financial year, compared with 18 in the previous year.⁵⁷

While the response has been predominantly punitive, another element has been Countering Violent Extremism. CVE encompasses a range of non-coercive efforts to dissuade people from becoming involved in terrorist activity. It is of renewed importance as Australia needs a wide range of tools to tackle the foreign fighter threat, not least because imprisonment, while often necessary, is not a cure-all. An imprisoned jihadist can radicalise other prisoners, inspire supporters outside, and may emerge from prison no less extreme or dangerous.⁵⁸ This has already occurred. At least one terrorist imprisoned after the 2005 Operation Pendennis raids joined IS after his release; several friends and relatives of the Pendennis plotters have as well.⁵⁹ A blanket attempt to imprison foreign fighters (such as in France, which recently jailed two underage boys who had returned voluntarily after becoming disillusioned with IS)⁶⁰ could have a radicalising effect on the returnees' friends, families, and communities, reinforcing a perception of a wider war between the West and Islam. Just as the justice system allows flexibility in dealing with a range of non-terrorist criminals (such as diverting some offenders into drug treatment rather than jail), including a CVE element in Australia's counter-terrorism approach can allow similar flexibility.

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CVE is also important because it will not be possible to prosecute all returning foreign fighters. Even when there is strong intelligence that a returning suspect has been involved with a terrorist group, gathering enough admissible evidence of their activities in Syria or Iraq to prove their guilt beyond reasonable doubt can be difficult. In addition, some of the people who could come to pose a threat may not have committed a crime yet, such as associates of foreign fighters, or people who have attempted to join the fight but had their passports confiscated. CVE measures, when successful, can reduce the number of people who have to be monitored, investigated, and prosecuted. The importance of CVE has been recognised in United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178.⁶¹ The Abbott Government has stated that CVE measures will form part of its response to foreign fighters, building on its use in the past as an element of Australia's counter-terrorism policies.

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PAST CVE IN AUSTRALIA

Preventive approaches to countering terrorism began under the Howard Government, long before the term 'CVE' gained currency. In the wake of the 2005 London bombings, with the threat of al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism proving persistent, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) held a Special Meeting on Counter-Terrorism and established the National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security. The plan provided funding for 83 community projects, primarily aimed at providing services to Muslim communities, with an expectation that such programs would reduce the terrorist threat.⁶²

The Rudd Government took a different approach, seeing CVE as requiring its own specialised strategy and initiatives, rather than as an anticipated outcome of a broader effort for community harmony. In December 2009, the National Counter-Terrorism Committee (a COAG body) established a permanent sub-committee, the Countering Violent Extremism Sub-Committee (CVESC), and created Australia's first national CVE framework.⁶³ This saw the end of the National Action Plan. Following the release of the *Counter-Terrorism White Paper: Securing Australia – Protecting our Future* in February 2010, the Attorney-General's Department established a Countering Violent Extremism Unit. Under the Gillard Government, this unit created two grant schemes: the Building Community Resilience Youth Mentoring Grants Program (a pilot program run in New South Wales and Victoria) and Building Community Resilience (which ran nationally for four years). CVESC, the AFP, and a number of state governments have also funded and administered CVE projects following the 2010 White Paper. However, the Attorney-General's Department's Building Community Resilience grants constituted the largest, and most public, element of Australia's CVE approach.⁶⁴

Assessments of these programs have been mixed, but one common criticism was that they tended to be targeted too broadly rather than

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directly engaging with at-risk individuals.⁶⁵ Western Australian academic Anne Aly warned that the Rudd–Gillard attempt to decouple the Howard-era conflation of social cohesion and counter-terrorism “may prove to be cosmetic,” as the Building Community Resilience program had strong continuities with the earlier National Action Plan, with the bulk of the funding “allocated to programs that aim to promote democratic participation of young Muslims; address issues of alienation and marginalisation; foster young Muslim leaders; and enhance Muslim youth civic competencies.”⁶⁶ Kuranda Seyit, Director of the Forum on Australia’s Islamic Relations, has said that CVE programs were often misplaced by being focused on entire communities.⁶⁷ He argued that this left a crucial gap, whereby no support services existed for people such as the parents of Abdul Numan Haider, the Melbourne teenager and suspected IS supporter who was shot dead after stabbing two police officers.⁶⁸ There have been exceptions, as some of the programs were more narrowly targeted to directly address extremist involvement, but these were relatively rare.⁶⁹ The review of the siege at the Lindt café noted that any engagement with individuals on a radicalisation trajectory occurred in an ad-hoc way, if at all.⁷⁰ This suggests that many of Australia’s past CVE measures are not directly suitable for addressing the foreign fighter threat; unsurprisingly, given they were not originally implemented with this threat in mind.

TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH

After its election in 2013, the Abbott Government did not build on these initiatives and made substantial funding cuts to CVE.⁷¹ However, in August 2014, when the Government allocated \$630 million to address the terrorist threat, it announced that this would include CVE.⁷² The Government declared that the Building Community Resilience Program was “now complete” and announced a new CVE approach, set for four years.⁷³ From statements so far, the new approach contains three core components: a \$13.4 million effort to assess at-risk individuals and refer them to support services that can help them reject violent extremism, called the Living Safe Together intervention program;⁷⁴ a \$21.7 million online CVE effort, which will involve promoting counter-narratives, and where possible removing online extremist material;⁷⁵ and tailoring the Department of Social Services (DSS) social-cohesion programs to support CVE objectives.⁷⁶

The component that most directly addresses the foreign fighter threat is the \$13.4 million tailored intervention program. As Australia’s past CVE efforts offer little guidance for the way ahead, this is an area where lessons can be learned from overseas experiences. However, judging from official statements, the Government primarily looks to the United Kingdom as the example to follow.⁷⁷ Australian CVE can learn much from other European countries too, which have extensive experience in

applying non-coercive measures to radicalised individuals, including foreign fighters.

One CVE initiative in Europe that focuses directly on the foreign fighter threat is the German program 'Hayat' (Arabic for "life"). Daniel Koehler, a family counsellor with the program, states that Hayat has a strong focus on persuading aspiring foreign fighters to not leave, to not engage in violence if they do leave, or to return home in a manner coordinated with authorities.⁷⁸ Hayat is not a counselling service aimed at the radicalised individual, but at their families and close friends through a self-referral process. The aim is to help families to create an environment around the radicalised individual that is likely to direct them away from violence. In addition to a 24-hour hotline, Hayat services sometimes bring three or four families together to share experiences.⁷⁹ Hayat has developed a strong international reputation, and its approach is being adopted by other countries, including the United Kingdom and Canada.⁸⁰

Another approach that has gained international attention is the 'Aarhus model' in Denmark. The Municipality of Aarhus, along with several local and national agencies, has been intervening with foreign fighters.⁸¹ Following a screening process, the program attempts to persuade and assist individuals to leave violent extremist networks while providing services that include medical treatment, psychological support, employment and housing assistance, and the re-establishment of community networks.⁸² The program uses mentors, often trained psychologists, to provide ongoing support for those willing to turn their lives around. Those unwilling to take part in the program are left for the security agencies to monitor. The program has been criticised in Denmark as soft and naive, but senior police reject the claim, arguing that the program has shown some success and that individuals who have violated anti-terrorism laws are still prosecuted where possible. Superintendent Allan Aarslev contends that, "What's easy... is to pass tough new laws. Harder is to go through a real process with individuals... We don't do this out of political conviction; we do it because we think it works."⁸³

One important lesson from these programs is that they were not run by security agencies. Hayat is a non-government organisation, and its engagement with returning foreign fighters is done in close coordination with the authorities, but institutionally independent from them.⁸⁴ The Aarhus program involves police, municipal authorities, social services, and schools working closely together with community organisations. To be effective, interventions often need to be undertaken by individuals or organisations other than the security services. Nonetheless, it is important that approaches are coordinated, to avoid a situation where one agency is applying a hard approach to an individual while another agency, or cooperating community organisation, is applying a soft one to the same person.

To be effective, interventions often need to be undertaken by individuals or organisations other than the security services.

This also suggests that although the broadly targeted nature of Australian CVE during the Rudd–Gillard era was problematic, the emphasis on working closely with communities was appropriate. Indeed, there are currently some community-driven CVE efforts in Australia, which work directly with individuals on a radicalisation trajectory, but these programs are struggling to operate with little to no support.⁸⁵ A successful CVE approach should draw on the talent that already exists within relevant communities. However, community cooperation has been undermined by the Government's replacement of the Building Community Resilience grants scheme with a much smaller, short-term grants scheme, with little detail provided about its new CVE approach.⁸⁶ Moreover, the poor consultation by the government with the Muslim community on much of Australia's new counter-terrorism legislation as well as the Prime Minister's claim that Muslim leaders are not doing enough to speak out against radical ideas have undermined the prospects for effective cooperation.⁸⁷

Attempts to apply CVE approaches from Europe directly to Australia could raise several challenges. One is that many of the most promising initiatives are often built on their countries' past experiences. For example, the precursor to Germany's Hayat program was a project called Strengthening Families Against Violence and Extremism, which was modelled on EXIT-Germany, a highly regarded CVE program created in 2000 to address neo-Nazism.⁸⁸ Consequently, Hayat has been able to build on institutional memory derived from an early investment into tailored intervention programs, making Germany well placed to address the Syria foreign fighter phenomenon. Australia does not have the same institutional experience, or as strong an NGO sector in the area. Legal and cultural differences can also pose obstacles, as approaches that are appropriate and effective in one country might not be in another. For example, the Aarhus program is possible because Denmark has fewer legal restrictions on foreign fighter activity than does Australia. Any attempt to replicate the Aarhus program in Australia without adjustments would be rejected by the public as far too lenient.

With regards to the other announced components of the Government's new CVE approach, prospects for their success are similarly uncertain. From the little information available about the DSS component, it appears to be continuing the broadly targeted nature of Australia's past CVE approaches through the conflation of social-cohesion policies with counter-terrorism. Overseas experiences, such as 'Prevent' (the UK's CVE effort that had to be reformed following a review in 2011), suggest a strong need for caution.⁸⁹ Framing social-cohesion programs (that are often worthy in themselves) as counter-terrorism initiatives risks further stigmatising large sections of the population as potential terrorists and prompting backlashes that may worsen the problem.⁹⁰ However, that these programs will be run by the DSS rather than the Attorney-General's Department may reduce this risk.

Framing social-cohesion programs...as counter-terrorism initiatives risks further stigmatising large sections of the population as potential terrorists and prompting backlashes that may worsen the problem.

The \$21.7 million online CVE component demonstrates recognition of how important the internet and social media have been for the Syria-Iraq mobilisation and the rise of IS, and shows that the Government is shaping its CVE approach to face the current threat. But again, there is little detail on how it will be implemented, and it is unclear how effective online CVE efforts can be. Attempts to remove online extremist content, for example, have been widely criticised as a futile game of “whack-a-mole.”⁹¹ However, new research does suggest that persistently suspending the Twitter accounts of IS supporters can significantly reduce their ability to spread their message.⁹² With regards to online counter-narratives, current research suggests that community groups are better placed to create and deliver anti-violence messages than governments are.⁹³ There are again promising examples overseas from which Australia can learn, such as the non-government initiative ‘Extreme Dialogue’ in the United Kingdom and Canada, which produces short films from people whose lives have been affected by violent extremism (including a former extremist and a mother whose son was killed in Syria).⁹⁴

...community groups are better placed to create and deliver anti-violence messages than governments are.

On the whole, CVE is a necessary element of Australia’s response to the foreign fighter threat, and one that has been recognised by the Australian Government. However, the path ahead will be difficult. CVE is currently an experimental area, and many of Australia’s past measures are not directly suitable for addressing the Syria-Iraq mobilisation. The Abbott Government’s stated shift to a tailored intervention program is a positive development that addresses a gap left by earlier governments, but the Government’s troubled relations with Muslim communities may reduce the effectiveness of this program. Fortunately, Australia is not facing this issue alone, and much can be learned from the experience of other countries in this area. In addition to the European CVE programs discussed here, there are many others addressing foreign fighters, such as the National Support Hotline in France and the Syria Awareness Campaign in the United Kingdom.⁹⁵ Many of these come under the umbrella of the European Union’s Radicalisation Awareness Network, which was established in 2011 by the European Commission to help facilitate the exchange of experiences and best practices between different CVE programs.⁹⁶

CONCLUSION

The Syria-Iraq mobilisation poses a serious national security threat to Australia. Historically, foreign fighter mobilisations have helped sustain jihadist movements and often resulted in violence outside of conflict zones for many years and even decades afterwards. Returned foreign fighters have been involved in many of the most serious jihadist plots in the West, including in Australia. Returnees from Syria have already engaged in terrorist plots in Europe, and the large number of Australians

A range of factors will determine the threat, including Australia's response.

involved with groups such as IS and Jabhat al-Nusra raises well-founded fears of an increased threat at home.

However, the threat may turn out to be less than feared. A range of factors will determine the threat, including Australia's response. While much of the responsibility will lie with the police and intelligence services, CVE measures need to be a core element of the response, as they have been in the past. Australia can learn valuable lessons from European countries, which are already using CVE measures to address the issue of foreign fighters, although any Australian approach must be carefully calibrated for the local context. But questions remain as to how any new CVE approach will be implemented by the Government. And the Government's troubled relations with Australia's Muslim communities mean that its efforts to counter violent extremism are not off to the strongest of starts.

NOTES

- ¹ David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Civil Conflicts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Definitions of foreign fighters generally exclude people who travel abroad to join state military forces or private military companies.
- ² 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): 1.
- ³ Anthony Bubalo and Greg Fealy, *Joining the Caravan? The Middle East, Islamism and Indonesia*, (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2005), xx. 'Jihadism' differs greatly from the understanding held by most Muslims of 'jihad', which is an important and complex Islamic concept. For accounts of the varied meanings of jihad throughout the history of Islam, see David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Richard Bonney, *Jihad: From the Quran to Bin Laden* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Waleed Aly, *People Like Us: How Arrogance is Dividing Islam and the West* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2007), 147–77; Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From the Extremists* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005), 220–49.
- ⁴ Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010).
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ⁶ Solahudin, *The Roots of Terrorism in Indonesia: From Darul Islam to Jema'ah Islamiyah* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2013).
- ⁷ Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," 2–3.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁹ Marc Sageman, "Confronting al-Qaeda: Understanding the Threat in Afghanistan," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 3, no. 4 (2009); Paul Cruickshank, *The Militant Pipeline*, New America Foundation (2011).
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- ¹² Peter Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," *ICSR Insight*, International Center for the Study of Radicalization, 26 January 2015.
- ¹³ Mirren Gidda, "No Place Like Home: What to Do When Jihadists Return," *BBC News*, 18 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29725116>.
- ¹⁴ Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (2015).

¹⁵ Brian Bennett and Richard A. Serrano, "More Western Fighters Joining Militants in Iraq and Syria," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 July 2014.

¹⁶ Andrew Zammit, "List of Alleged Violent Plots in Europe Involving Syria Returnees," *The Murphy Raid* (blog), last updated 25 January 2015, <http://andrewzammit.org/2014/06/29/list-of-alleged-violent-plots-in-europe-involving-syria-returnees/>.

¹⁷ "Charlie Hebdo Suspect Trained in Yemen," *SBS News*, 10 January 2015, <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2015/01/10/charlie-hebdo-suspect-trained-yemen>; Julian Borger, "Paris Gunman Amedy Coulibaly Declared Allegiance to Isis," *The Guardian*, 12 January 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/11/paris-gunman-amedy-coulibaly-allegiance-isis>.

¹⁸ Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," 10. Hegghammer also stresses that one in nine is a maximum estimate, and that the real figure is more likely to be around one in twenty. Thomas Hegghammer, "Will ISIS 'Weaponize' Foreign Fighters?," *CNN*, 17 October 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/16/opinion/hegghammer-isis-foreign-fighters/>.

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²⁰ Felix Kuehn, Leah Farrall and Alex Strick van Linschoten, *Expert Report, US vs. Talha Ahsan, US vs. Babar Ahmad* (April 2014): 3, http://www.sacc.org.uk/sacc/docs/ba_expert_reports.pdf#page=148; Mitchell D. Silber, "Al-Qa'ida's Center of Gravity in a Post-Bin Ladin World," *CTC Sentinel* (November 2011).

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³⁴ Pete Simi, Bryan F. Bubolz, and Ann Hardman, "Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism: An Exploratory Analysis," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (2013).

³⁵ Timothy Holman, "Blind: Five Factors Influencing the Foreign Fighter Impact," *Across The Green Mountain* (blog), 10 January 2014, accessed 6 January 2015, <http://acrossthegreenmountain.wordpress.com/2014/01/10/blind-five-factors-influencing-the-foreign-fighter-impact/>.

³⁶ Matt Apuzzo, "NSA Surveillance Program and the Najibullah Zazi Terrorist Threat," (speech, Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 10 October 2013).

³⁷ The dataset was initially constructed as part of the ARC Linkage Council project "Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation, and De-Radicalisation: Developing a New Understanding of Terrorism in the Australian Context" (LP.0990577). Data from 31 August 2013 onwards (covering around 40 individuals) was gathered independently of the project. There is a risk of false positives, as some individuals may be included as a result of inaccurate media reporting or fraudulent social media profiles. However, the figures are more likely to substantially understate the number of Australian foreign fighters than overstate them. As the credibility of the sources varies, each data point was assigned one of three levels of reliability: High, Medium, or Low. Examples of high-strength data include when a particular fact about an individual is explicitly stated by a judge when sentencing, and not compellingly disputed elsewhere. Another example is when an individual talks openly to a journalist about a particular fact, and this is consistent with other information on the individual. Examples of medium-strength data include when a particular fact can be inferred from judge's sentencing statement, but is not explicitly stated. Information from media sources is also rated as medium if it is not contradicted by other sources and if we considered the reporting reliable, such as if the journalist was present at court proceedings, had interviewed people involved, or had specialised in reporting terrorism for some time. As another example, if an individual was convicted of terrorist activity in a country where court proceedings did not follow liberal democratic standards, but the alleged crime was consistent with other information on the individual, it would also be listed as medium. This was often the case for the individuals convicted in Lebanon. Examples of low-strength data include when the information comes from a media source but the journalist is not clear about what they base the claim on, or if the media articles simply attributed

information to anonymous sources. Also, if an individual was convicted of terrorist activity in a country where court proceedings did not follow liberal democratic standards, and there was no other information to indicate the individual was involved in the alleged activity, it was listed as low.

³⁸ The dataset uses a similar definition of foreign fighter as used in Hegghammer's study: a jihadist engaged in "any military activity (training or fighting), using any tactic (terrorist or guerrilla tactics), against any enemy (Western or non-Western)" so long as the activity occurred outside Australia, and the person was a resident or citizen of Australia before engaging in the relevant activity. However, the definition of 'military activity' was broadened beyond training and combat to include other activity such as smuggling weapons. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," 1.

³⁹ Bret Walker, *Independent National Security Legislation Monitor Annual Report*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 28 March 2014, 44, https://www.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/INSLM_Annual_Report_20140328.pdf.

⁴⁰ The dataset covered the location of the alleged foreign fighter activity, the year/s it occurred, and its reported nature. If an individual engaged in jihadist activity in two foreign countries, they were included twice, though a note of these overlaps was made.

⁴¹ Author Irfan Yusuf moved in Australia's radical Islamist circles in the 1980s and has described how a friend of his seemed to know Australians who were fighting in Afghanistan. See Irfan Yusuf, *Once Were Radicals: My Years as a Teenage Islamo-fascist* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009), 151.

⁴² Shandon Harris-Hogan and Andrew Zammit, "Mantiqi IV: Al-Qaeda's Failed Co-Optation of a Jemaah Islamiyah Support Network," *Democracy and Security* 10, no. 4 (2014).

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⁴⁹ Andrew Zammit, "Tracking Australian Foreign Fighters in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 11–12 (2013); Andrew Zammit, "New Developments in Australian Foreign Fighter Activity," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 9 (2014).

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⁵¹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front Official Explains Al Qaeda's Strategy, Conflict with Former Branch," *Long War Journal*, 14 April 2014.

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program for convicted terrorists in Victorian prisons, which is particularly relevant with foreign fighters and supporters facing jail time; and the Somali Podcast Project, a community initiative that received some CVE funding. Among many goals, the project aimed to counter the extremist message of al-Shabaab, which had attracted some foreign fighters from Australia. See Ben Brooks, "More than Bills and Bombs"; Farah Farouque, "Taming Anger Behind Bars," *The Age*, 15 September 2012; Philippa McDonald, "Somali Podcast Combating Extremist Messages," *ABC News*, 15 May 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-05-14/somali-podcast-combating-extremist-messages/4689436>.

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