Beyond belief: Islamism, radicalisation and the counter-terrorism response

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Defining the problem

Since September 2001, a challenge has emerged to the security of the modern, liberal democratic state unlike anything previously confronted. It is not an imperial threat, or a threat from another state. It is not a threat to territory like that presented at various times in European history since the formation of the Westphalian state system or during the Cold War by the Soviet Union. Nor is it a threat posed in secular, ideological terms such as Communism.

These challenges presented themselves in rationally calculable terms and were concerned with the determination of borders or spheres of influence. Policy responses could assume conventional forms: diplomacy, treaties and war conducted by traditional military methods. Strategic responses might involve at various...
times: deterrence, participation in alliances, containment and balance, or the pursuit of global order through multilateral institutions. These policies and the relationships they induced presumed state actors were capable, even under conditions of armed conflict, of rational calculation of their national interests. Post-9/11 rational models for understanding the international order retail at a discount, because the challenge currently posed comes in a form not previously encountered. It comes in the shape of a distinctively universal, but non-secular ideology carefully calibrated both to the demands of the post-Cold War order and those states most failed by it. The threat, of course, is militant Islamism. Unlike traditional Islam which sought to avoid modernity, militant Islamism as it emerged in the Middle East in the interstices of the Cold War, seeks directly to confront it. Fuelled by an understanding that views the West, democracy and secular modernity, to use Sayyid Qutb’s phrase ‘as hideously schizophrenic’, Islamism seeks not only to expose the incoherence at the heart of secular modernity but to engineer an apocalyptic confrontation with it. Narrowly conceived, militant Islamism promotes a non-negotiable vision posed in apocalyptic terms. This has implications for Islamism’s strategic thought and practice. As a post-modern ideological movement it is significantly decentralised. Unlike Stalinism, Fascism or Maoism it does not require a Moscow, Berlin or Beijing as its organisational and ideological focus. The ‘Solid Base’ (al-Qaeda) is everywhere and its attempt to promote a revitalised caliphate through a global network of mosques, sympathetic non-governmental organisations, failed states and Internet sites, is facilitated by the processes of globalisation. Indeed, Islamism’s supranational ideal and protean character means that it can organise, plan and recruit much more effectively in Western cosmopolitan cities like London, Paris or Sydney than from its more traditional homelands in the Middle East, or South and Southeast Asia.

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In strategic terms, militant Islamism operates differently from earlier ideological threats to liberal democracies. It recognises the inadequacy of confronting by conventional means the military and technological advantages currently enjoyed by the West. As a matter of strategic preference, the committed Islamist prefers guerrilla tactics translated from a national to a transnational battlefield, as a means of subverting open democracies and destabilising the alliance structures built by the United States during the Cold War. Indeed, it is the inherent openness of Western societies that invites recourse to mass casualty attacks on soft civilian targets.

In order to facilitate both the global insurgency and its appeal, its strategists exploit the technology and infrastructure of global connectivity. Networks operating informally from Western capitals and in a manner loosely connected to al-Qaeda and capable of independent and devastating effect have proved notably difficult to identify and disrupt.

Islamism, therefore, as an ideology and an insurgency addresses the conflicted allegiances of minority second generation communities living in the West by offering potential recruits an explanation for their plight and a complete solution to it. Islamism motivates behaviour, facilitates recruitment
and affords a justification for terrorist acts against host countries. Somewhat paradoxically, it does not even require a profound religious understanding: most of the individuals involved in recent jihadist plots in Europe, North America and Australia were recent converts to Islam.

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Consequently, countering the processes of Islamist radicalisation has become a first order priority for police and intelligence agencies. Of course, these agencies also face the prospect of radicalisation from a range of other non-traditional ideological forces. However, the focus of this paper is the Islamist threat, as opposed to alternative forms of ethno-religious and Gnostic radicalisation and the character of state counter-subversion responses. From the outset, it is apparent that the precise trigger for some, primarily, young and otherwise ‘unremarkable’ males between 18–35 years of age, to follow the path of jihad remains unclear. There is no single profile of the Islamist terrorist.

However, from several recent studies of home-grown terrorist networks in Europe and North America it is clear that jihadists often form small groups comprised of self-radicalised individuals and engage in a series of bonding exercises before committing a terrorist act. They often require a spiritual sanctioner or charismatic leader. According to a recent New York Police Department Intelligence Division study the path to jihad proceeds through four distinct phases: pre-radicalisation (alienation and dislocation from mainstream society); self-identification (with Islamist ideological goals); indoctrination (increasing militancy); and Jihadisation (self-designation as holy warriors). The process may entail a long period of gestation. Some opt out along the way.

The process, moreover, is neither linear nor deterministic. And the non-criminal nature of many of the activities involved in radicalisation complicates counter-subversion and law enforcement responses.

As this new security threat has evolved it requires a policing response that, as the recent failed Glasgow and London bombings demonstrate, is simultaneously global and local. This fact, as Peter Clarke, Head of the UK Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command observes, renders modern policing increasingly political. In this context, Western security forces have acknowledged that the terrorist’s recourse to symbolism, myth and theatre inevitably politicises the conventional policing of law and order in a democracy. Such politicisation becomes more problematic in the context of an open society when the use of violence and subversion serves an ideology that claims a transcendental purpose yet feeds off local and global perceptions of ethnic and religious grievance, the alienation of minorities and the escalation of identity politics.

International responses

Notwithstanding important jurisdictional differences, the manner in which foreign intelligence and police agencies have responded to Islamist radicalisation provides critical insights for counter-terrorism efforts in Australia. The next section of this paper explores the evolution of Islamism in Europe and the subsequent counter-radicalisation strategies currently evolving in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The paper then proceeds to briefly examine Singapore’s approach before turning to the overall policy implications for Australia.
The Netherlands

The problem of home-grown jihadists has become a key priority for Dutch policymakers. With a sizeable Muslim minority coming primarily from Turkey and Morocco, (9,450,000 or 5.8% of the population), and several incidents of Islamist violence in recent years, the Dutch have become acutely aware of the risks posed by radicalisation.

The jihadist threat has evolved through three phases. In the early 1990s, the Netherlands received extremists as immigrants and asylum seekers from North Africa, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Chechnya and Bosnia. Some of these were veterans of violent jihad and some knew each other from training camps. In the late 1990s, and certainly by 2000, foreign extremists began to approach Dutch Muslims in a recruitment drive for jihad abroad. Initially, some Salafist mosques were the major forum for radical preachers to build influence over recent migrants and second or third generation Muslims.

The Dutch state now grapples with a third phase: namely, home-grown radicalisation. Dutch authorities believe, however, that the threat is relatively contained, despite the fact that since the assassination of film director Theo van Gogh, there has been greater polarisation between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Dutch authorities believe that young Muslims can experience an identity crisis when they feel marginalised from Dutch society but are disconnected from their parents’ traditional culture. Their first-hand knowledge of Arabic and the Koran may be rather limited, leaving them without a solid
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base of knowledge from which to assess the claims and exhortations of radical recruiters.

Focused on cities such as Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht, the Netherlands have formulated what it believes to be a comprehensive approach, equally reliant upon repression of radical activity and strategies for deradicalising individuals. Although action on the national level can be useful for reducing inter-ethnic tensions, the focus is on cities and neighbourhoods. Police forces and municipal governments are particularly significant because they are in direct contact with local Muslim communities. However, the police have only an early warning function. They collect signals on radicalisation that are passed to regional authorities.

In several major cities, the Netherlands has instituted systems to channel reported radicalisation concerns towards information points at the local level. Here they are assessed and, if warranted, local agents attempt to devise a contextually appropriate response, with some backing from the national security services.

A focus for concern is non-violent Salafist imams and institutions. These are monitored if possible and local authorities try to liaise with them to ensure they are aware of their broader social responsibilities. This includes the expectation that they bar terrorist recruiters from attendance and that they encourage young Muslims to use non-violent methods to pursue the societal changes Islam calls for. Where members are found to be promoting radicalisation or their influence is encouraging violence, Dutch law enforcement agencies attempt to prosecute or deport.

Recognising that foreign preachers have often been catalysts for radicalisation, the Netherlands has been helping Muslim communities to devise training programs for imams. It is hoped that locally-trained religious scholars will be better-informed about and integrated into Dutch society, enabling them to provide constructive guidance to young Muslims. Sometimes Islamic groups don’t accept imams who are ‘brainwashed’ and extreme imams have taken over from ‘soft’ imams.

Specialist training is also given to imams who service prisons. Convicted jihadists have been separated from other detainees and prison staff receive instructions in detecting and monitoring radicalisation.

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Against the daunting challenge of countering jihadists in cyberspace, the Dutch law enforcement agencies have been developing a ‘notice and take down’ process with Internet service providers when they are found to be hosting radical websites. This is still developing at the moment: the Dutch have been monitoring the Internet and there is a central point for dealing with cybercrime, where radicalisation and counter terrorism are the main focus. The major problem has been gaining the cooperation of the providers. Conversely, the government has also attempted to provide information on Islam for Dutch websites.

In a related vein, the Dutch authorities support institutions that disseminate moderate Islamic views both online and offline. Through some of these, national and local activities are organised that aim to teach young Muslims skills that will enable them to engage more with society and take part in public discourse.
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The Dutch approach to jihadist activities seems well-suited to a problem that consists of a spectrum of concerns, ranging from alienated youth to aggressive and hate-filled foreign imams. Given this diversity, the emphasis on local knowledge and responses helps to minimise polarisation between Muslims and non-Muslims. Most importantly, there is a balance between determined interventions against the fringes of radicalisation and action to create openings for young Muslims to participate more fully in wider society. The focus points are the youth centres with an ultra-orthodox character, mostly visited by young Moroccans. Of course, the paradox here is that the secular government in Holland has to act as a recruiter for moderate Islam.

The United Kingdom

In November 2006, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, the Director General of MI5 at that time, publicly acknowledged the realities of the terrorist threat facing the UK. Her comments reinforced those of other British politicians and police. Peter Clarke considered the threat to the UK from al-Qaeda related terrorism as ‘real, here, deadly and enduring’ reinforcing the words of the UK Home Secretary that the struggle will be ‘long and wide and deep’. In the wake of the thwarted attacks on London and Glasgow in June 2007, the fifteenth attempted terrorist plot since 2001, Prime Minister Gordon Brown has acknowledged that the UK faces a generation long challenge.

What former Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) recruiter Hassan Butt terms the ‘British Jihadi Network’ emerged in the course of the 1990s and in its home-grown form represents a distinctive second generation Muslim migrant response to the host British community.

The approximately 2 million British Muslims emerged as a significant minority population as a consequence of imperial decolonisation after 1947. The vast majority of Muslim migrants originated from South Asia, notably from the moderate Muslim Bareli community of the Punjab. They settled in East London and in declining industrial towns in the Midlands and Northeast, like Leeds. From the 1960s, the United Kingdom also played host to a small population of Middle Eastern and North African Muslims who sought political asylum from persecution in their homelands. At the same time, close economic and political ties between the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States during the Cold War facilitated Saudi charities and foundations proselytizing an Islam of an essentially Wahhabist and Salafist character across the UK. The Wahhabist message promulgated in the medium of English language to the growing British Muslim community contrasted with the customary and syncretic brand of Islam preached and practiced traditionally by the British South Asian community.

The end of the Cold War, the success of the mujahideen in Afghanistan and the first Gulf War witnessed a notable radicalisation of Islamist political thinking and its transmission to the UK. Also, in the course of the Bosnian crisis after 1995 and its widespread media coverage, British Islamist recruits started attending training camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan and serving in the jihad in Bosnia. Jihadists connected to al-Qaeda (formed in Peshawar in 1990) like Abu Hamza al Masri, Omar Bhakri Mohammed and Abu Qatada established themselves as political leaders in the UK in the course of this curious decade and, via their influence over Saudi-funded mosques such as the Central Mosque in Regent’s Park in London and the Finsbury Park mosque, recruited many individuals to their understanding of political Islamism.

The formation of British versions of parties like Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun, whose
its distinction between Islamism and the West and to recruit educated middle-class Muslims to the British Jihadi Network. This facilitated a general culture of community dissent where ‘preachers of hate’ freely promulgated a separatist message of Islamic supremacy.

Access to the Internet and the ease of access to training camps and madrassas in South Asia further facilitated the evolution of this home-grown network. In other words, it would be erroneous to assume that the evolution of this British jihadist worldview either before or after 9/11 was in any way a self-starting phenomenon or the provenance of an essentially anomic underclass. Evidence from the Crawley-based Crevice gang trial in 2007 demonstrated extensive links between supposedly isolated and dislocated British terrorists in London, Birmingham and West Yorkshire, as well as their essentially middle
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class social backgrounds. Indeed, as London mutated into ‘Londonistan’ in the course of the 1990s, these links in the loose knit chain of the British jihadi network, a series of semi-autonomous British Muslim terrorist groups proliferated.

Although British foreign policy played a significant role in British Muslim alienation it was by no means critical. As Hassan Butt observed in the wake of the London and Glasgow attacks in June, ‘I remember how we used to laugh in celebration whenever people on TV proclaimed that the sole cause for Islamic acts of terror like 9/11, the Madrid bombings and the 7 July 2005 London bombings, also known as 7/7, was Western foreign policy. By blaming the government for our actions, those who pushed the Blair’s bombs line did our propaganda work for us. More important, they also helped to draw away any critical examination from the real engine of our violence: Islamic theology’.

Far more important for an alienated second generation of educated British Muslims was the manner in which the ideology of Islamism addressed the profound conflict they faced in adjusting to the incompatible demands of a plural and diverse British modernity and the traditional requirements of their kin and ethnic attachments. As Shiv Malik shows in his sociological analysis of ‘The Making of a Terrorist,’ 7/7 bomber Mohammed Sidique Khan ‘was on a collision course with his family and background’ as soon as he joined the Beeston ‘Mullah Boys’ as a teenager and began his dissociation from the traditional understanding of both religion and the familial obligation of the Kashmiri baradiri system that required arranged marriages. From the dilemmas of Kashmiri tradition and British multiculturalism, Islamism which stressed the unity and primacy of a purified religious practice superseded the obligations of tribe or state and offered a clear solution to a distinctly post-modern urban and Western dilemma.

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Cases like that of the Crevice gang, Dhiren Barot or former London School of Economics student Omar Saeed Sheikh who led Daniel Pearl to his death in Islamabad, demonstrate an identity crisis initiated by the novitiate’s recruitment to British jihadism after 2001. However, it was the presence of ‘preachers of hate’ and the ease with which Islamists could manipulate the institutional machinery of local government, mosques and tertiary education institutions to their broader purpose that ultimately facilitated the violent and organised character of British radicalisation. Indeed, on 25 July 2007, Prime Minister Gordon Brown issued a Statement on Security that noted, *inter alia* that ‘the police and security services currently have to contend with around 30 known plots, and monitor over 200 groupings or networks and around 2,000 individuals’.

In attempting to respond to the unanticipated dimensions of the home-grown network, the British Government has responded in a variety of ways. It is establishing a national security strategy. Externally, the government has moved somewhat belatedly to secure its borders. The government anticipates that by 2009 it will have implemented ‘new enhanced system of electronic exit controls’ and created a ‘unified border force’. It will also initiate a further line of defence founded on ‘ID security
within our own borders’ which will see the introduction of biometric ID cards from 2009.

At the same time, the UK police and criminal justice authorities have been given extensive powers under various acts of legislation dating from 2000 and culminating in the Terrorism Act (2006) which introduced the crime of ‘acts preparatory to terrorism’ into the criminal code. Parliament extended the maximum period for detention to 28 days and has thereby delegated new policing powers to investigate and arrest at an earlier stage. Intelligence and security services have received significant increases in both staffing and funds.\(^7\)

Since the attacks of July 2005, there has been a complete re-evaluation of UK counter-terrorism policy. In particular, MI5 has established much closer links with the various regional police forces and their chief constables. MI5 has opened eight regional offices outside London in areas like the Midlands, West Yorkshire and Glasgow, locations where previous plots have either been uncovered or have occurred. Regional police forces, like West Yorkshire, have also established since 2005 their own regional counter terror units.\(^8\) As a consequence, several terrorist networks have been disrupted. Since 2004, the police have uncovered Operation Crevice, the Dhiren Barot plot to plant a ‘dirty’ or radiological bomb in London and the airlines plot to blow up a dozen passenger planes over the Atlantic in August 2006.

A number of jihadists have received prison sentences, notably the Barot gang, the Crevice gang and those responsible for the failed 21 July 2005 attack on the London underground. Nevertheless, whilst prosecution of up to 100 other suspects proceeds, it is taking over two years to bring most cases to court. Moreover, in the UK, the judiciary, unlike the Netherlands or France, (which are not common law jurisdictions) has acted with skepticism towards government demands for the detention of suspected jihadists without trial. Moreover, the use of control orders to monitor terror suspects has been widely criticised and limited in effect—four controlees have disappeared this year.

Recruiters have also been tackled and a number of ‘preachers of hate’ have been deported (notably al-Muhajiroun and Hizb founder Omar Bakri Mohammed to the Lebanon). Others, such as Abu Hamza al Masri who has been sentenced to seven years imprisonment for inciting murder, await extradition to the United States for their role in the 9/11 attack. Yet, whilst the role of Hizb ut-Tahrir as a key proponent of UK Islamism has come under increased government scrutiny, it continues to act legally as a party recruiting to the ideology both globally, via its forty overseas branches, and locally.

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The more robust responses of the UK Government since 2005 have thus had some success in disrupting the leadership within organised Islamism and sown internal divisions within the wider movement. Nevertheless the continuing identification of ‘clean skins’ (individuals not previously known to law enforcement agencies) and the role of the Internet, prisons and British universities in recruitment and radicalisation suggest that this resilient informal jihadi network continues to function.
Peter Clarke has observed that ‘the current terrorist threat is of such a scale and intractability that we must not only defeat the men…who plot and carry out appalling acts of violence. We must find a way of defeating the ideas that drive them. The corrosive ideologies that justify them must be defeated’. Clarke further observed that, ‘of all the things, I have seen over the past few years, one of the most worrying has been the speed and apparent ease with which young men can be turned into suicidal terrorists’. He concluded that one of the things ‘we need to work harder at is diversion—how to turn people away from the extremists’.

However, the UK has until recently failed to develop significant policy measures to prevent the radicalisation of Muslim youth. Indeed, it has become increasingly apparent that a number of local authority and education programs together with the government’s open border policy toward overseas migration have actively encouraged radicalisation rather than deterrence.

The national level has thus become the most relevant conduit for the promotion of counter-radicalisation strategies. Since 2005, an ongoing political debate about the need to incorporate an understanding of ‘Britishness’ and British values both into secondary school education programs and as part of the application for citizenship has informed this strategy. Both sides of politics talk of building national cohesion, a change in rhetorical tone at least from the preoccupation with the politics of diversity.

There has also been some attempt to set up training programs for imams, so that mosques do not have to rely on foreign preachers. The government has made $A160 million available to improve the capacity of local communities to resist violent extremism. In Bradford, the government reached an agreement with local madrassas to include citizenship education in their curricula, whilst it is also looking to support new skills qualifications in ‘community cohesion’ for faith leaders and to sponsor English speaking imams. However, there have been questions raised about the Muslim Council of Britain being given responsibility for some of these initiatives, given the Council’s susceptibility to Wahhabist understanding and practice.

Since 2005, there has also been a growing awareness and debate about the role that UK prisons have played in recruitment such as the shoe-bomber Richard Reid. Reid was first recruited in the Feltham Young Offenders Unit in West London. Imams in prisons have proved very effective at recruiting the vulnerable and marginalised. Prison authorities recently removed Dhiren Barot from London’s Belmarsh prison because of his apparent success in radicalising a number of inmates. More recently, the Home Secretary has discussed the possibility of a specific prison to cater for jihadists.

At the other end of the recruitment spectrum, the government has also raised concern about the role of the tertiary education sector, most notably London University, in facilitating Islamist ideology via Islamic Societies and access to Internet technology for creating jihadist websites. For example, the British Jihadi Media Battalion recently produced and released Mohammed Sidique Khan’s martyrdom video from a university website.

Trying to increase information available about Islam by supporting institutions that voice moderate views and pass on factual information about the religion is thus an ongoing concern. However, given revelations about the British Muslim Council and the practice of al-taquiyya (lying) by Salafist imams, it is difficult for local authorities to identify the truly moderate voices. Moreover, there has been little attempt to interdict the funding of Salafist education material and teaching by Saudi Arabian charities operating in the UK.
Increasingly local authorities will have to take a more proactive role in the education and socialisation processes of young British Muslim males, since they are familiar with their own Muslim communities. However, programs of inclusiveness and cohesion are only at the discussion stage.

Singapore

The majority Chinese city-state of Singapore, ruled by the Peoples Action Party (PAP) since independence, evolved out of the communalism of the late 1960s a number of strategies to address the needs of its minority Malay Muslim population. Muslim Malays make up about 14% of Singapore’s population of 3.2 million. As an administrative party state, the government has wide powers to intervene to manage and control radical ideas whether of a Communist or an Islamist provenance. In the course of the 1970s Singapore adopted a policy of ethno-religious management that sought to manage minority issues via ethno-religious peak bodies. Mendaki, the Muslim Malay population peak organisation, thus addressed issues of alienation amongst Malay youth that form the basis of early intervention strategies.

This corporatist management of the city state, moreover, ensures both grass root and parliamentary representation for Malay Muslim opinion via the Group Representation Constituency system which requires each constituency in the Singaporean parliament to field a minority community candidate. At the same time, education and housing policy requires that schools and local communities never assume the character of ethno-religious ghettos.

Strict policies available to the single-party state reinforce the capacity to restrict and control violent dissent. The local press is used to curtail radical religious or political views. Since 1992, the Religious Harmony Act has effectively banned any negative religious or ethnic commentary. Meanwhile, the Internal Security Act (ISA) dating from the Communist insurgency of the 1950s affords the state a capacity to detain without trial those suspected of promoting subversive ideas. The scope of the ISA has been expanded since the 1980s and effectively negated the need for Singapore to introduce specific anti-terrorism legislation.

Significantly, those individuals who were part of a previously unsuspected Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) cell planning to conduct a series of bombings on infrastructure targets in Singapore in 2001 were arrested and detained under the ISA. The detainees have never appeared in court and are likely to remain in detention as long as the state determines them a threat. The authoritarian reach of the city state has notably operated to curb both jihadi websites as well as local Muslim bookshops.

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On a more proactive note the Singapore Government is working closely with Muslim civil society—especially moderate religious scholars—to try to rehabilitate detainees currently held in prison. This work is being conducted primarily by the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG). The RRG is a volunteer group of scholars who work not just with detainees, but with the families of detainees, as well as the wider public in an attempt to counter radical interpretations of the Koran.
Regional Islamist networks, such as Jemaah Islamiyah, recognise the importance of sustaining their support base in the face of ongoing counter-terrorism measures. Their messages seek to glorify their appeal, exploit Muslim grievances (community, family, personal), and promote a sense of victimisation by, and/or resentment towards the West among Muslims around the world.

Using additional funding of $35 million over four years provided in the 2006–07 Budget the Australian Government has developed a range of measures in Southeast Asia to help counter extremist ideologies. Australia is working with governments, non-government organisations (NGOs) and community groups to discredit extremist propaganda and assist governments to take more effective action against extremist groups and their ideas.

Australia, for example, is a co-sponsor (with Indonesia, the Philippines and New Zealand) of a series of regional interfaith dialogues. The first was held in Yogyakarta in December 2004, the second in Cebu in March 2006 and the most recent in Waitangi in May 2007. In 2008, a fourth meeting will be held in Cambodia (co-hosted by Australia). These meetings bring together key representatives from many major faiths to promote greater interfaith understanding as a means to deny extremists religious or moral legitimacy.

Other activities in the region are focused at the grassroots community level in areas such as capacity-building and community outreach. They include support for mainstream NGOs and democratic community networks, media workshops, initiatives to raise awareness of the threat to marginalised communities posed by extremist ideology and propaganda, support for community interfaith activities to strengthen peace-building networks in communities affected by conflict, and exchange visits to strengthen links between communities.

These activities aim to provide opportunities for government agencies, social, educational and religious institutions, community organisations and individuals to become directly involved in activities designed to emphasise shared values, such as the rule of law and non-discrimination.

By supporting development in education, human rights, governance, infrastructure, rural development and the strengthening of civil society, Australia’s aid program potentially reduces community’s vulnerability to extremism.

Australia is funding the construction and expansion of 2,000 schools, including around 500 Islamic schools in Indonesia. Australia is also funding a major education assistance package in the Philippines, expected to total more than $100 million by 2010-11, including $13 million for Islamic schooling. Australia’s overall package of support for education in the region totals more than $2 billion over the next five years.
Singapore’s proactive mix of assimilation policies and corporatist management of Muslim opinion has proved extraordinarily effective since 2002 in curtailting the emergence or spread of the Islamist ideology on which jihadism feeds.

Implications for Australia

The challenge of militant Islamism requires new modes of thinking about the character of political Islam’s ideology, its relationship with a fast and interconnected world order, and its capacity to exploit the dark side of globalisation to undermine authority in both developed and developing states.

As the above national case studies demonstrate, counter-radicalisation strategies require policy adjustments to specific and contingent local circumstances. However, it is possible to distil from the various cases a mix of international ‘best practices’ that may be appropriately adjusted to the less volatile Australian context.

Significantly, the most effective strategies employed by Dutch, British and Singaporean agencies blend a proactive, managerial policy that addresses issues of cohesion, identity and alienation and seeks to build more effective relationship with local Muslim communities at the provincial and metropolitan level, with a more determined prosecution of those promoting the ideology and practice of jihadism at the national level.

Enforcement has required a range of legislative responses, most notably new terror legislation, preventive detention and control orders which in democracies like the United Kingdom and the Netherlands occasioned widespread debate, legal challenge and criticism from influential political interests in the media, the universities and the judiciary.
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Given Australia’s recent experiences with Islamist radicalisation since 2002 that inter alia includes the discovery of the presence of foreign Islamists like Willie Brigitte and Faheem Lodhi in 2003, and home grown radicals like Jack Roche and Jack Thomas together with the discovery of an alleged plot in Sydney and Melbourne in 2006, it’s evident that Australia remains a potential jihadist target. Most importantly the Islamist message on the Internet can spread the problem of militant radicalisation very quickly.

Alongside the evolving administrative and legal framework to control and prosecute those who contemplate violent jihadism, it is evident that homeland security will also require the cooperation of Australia’s Muslim communities, which represent 1.7% of the population. It should be emphasised that any prospective attack on Australian soil would also constitute an attack on the moderate, mainstream Muslim communities.

Muslims in Australia

The 2006 Census found that there are 340,392 Muslims in Australia, an increase of around 21% on the previous 2001 Census. 48.7% are under the age of 24. More than a third of Australia’s Muslims were born in Australia, but a further 63,000 Muslims migrated to Australia over the last five years. Of this group, 39% of arriving Muslims settled in Sydney, while another 27% settled in Melbourne. The remaining capital cities received between 0% (Tasmania and Darwin) and 9% (Perth) of incoming Muslim migrants.

The most important source of Muslim migration to Australia was traditionally Lebanon, but Turkey and South Asia (excluding India) have become relatively more important over the past five years. Together, these latter two groups comprise 38% of Muslims migrating to Australia. Other significant migrant groups include Muslims arriving from Central Asia (12% of total Muslim arrivals), sub-Saharan Africa (7%), Indonesia (6%) and Iraq (6%). Between 2001 and 2006, migrants from Lebanon comprised just 6% of Muslim arrivals, yet 70% of this group settled in Sydney. Today there are around 130,000 Muslims of Lebanese ancestry living in Sydney. Among other Muslim migrant groups, Sydney remains the most popular destination for those arriving from South Asia, Iraq and North Africa, while Melbourne is particularly popular amongst Turks, and those arriving from Europe, Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.
In this context, the government has already established, with relevant stakeholders, a *National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security* (NAP) to respond to issues that contribute to the potential for extremism to develop in this country.³

Community engagement will need to focus upon groups and individuals that invoke Islamism as a means to justify violent and extreme acts. There is no easy solution to countering this subversive behaviour. However, five steps might be undertaken to prevent the type of violent extremism that has evolved in Western Europe and elsewhere from establishing itself in Australia.

**National counter-radicalisation strategy**

In acknowledging the threat posed by homegrown Islamist radicalisation, the Australian Government needs to craft an effective, long-term policy response. Drawing upon European and Southeast Asian best practice, the Australian Government and law enforcement agencies should aim to drain the ideological swamp in which radicalisation thrives, before it becomes fully established.

A national counter-radicalisation strategy should be developed as a national whole-of-government response to the emerging problem of Islamist radicalisation. It should also be sensitive to the important regional differences and processes that distinguish Muslim communities throughout Australia.

**Australian Muslim National Security Forum**

In order to prevent terrorism there is a need to strengthen community cohesion further. In September 2005, the government established the Muslim Community Reference Group for a one year term to advise on Muslim community issues. There is now a requirement to consider future models for dialogue.

To enhance cooperation between Australia’s Muslim communities and state/territory police and the Australian Federal Police an *Australian Muslim National Security Forum* (AMNSF), at both national and state levels, should be established to develop strategies for tackling extremism that may lead to acts of terrorism.

Local Muslim communities, business, youths (particularly Muslim women), University Muslim Student Associations and religious leaders and organisations, as well as police representatives would comprise the Forum. Over time, the Forum would establish a dedicated Youth Council. AMNSF could thereby play a crucial role in detecting those prone to pre-radicalisation via its direct access to the grassroots dynamics of local communities.
The creation of state-based forums is more likely to gain traction with local communities than a national forum alone. Australian Government funding for these forums would be appropriate, but it will be important that this is not viewed as purchasing federal control.

The Forum might encourage Muslims who reject violence to participate in Internet forums and challenge those defending violence or martyrdom in the Australian Islamic community. The AMNSF would not only identify and combat extremism, but also act as a think tank, analysing the dynamics of disaffection. It would share information on possible threats and give religious and community leaders a platform to condemn terrorist acts. It might sponsor education programs for Muslim communities on what signs to look for in order to identify radicalisation.

Increasing numbers of young Australian Muslims are turning to the Internet for information on Islam and for radicalisation. The Forum might encourage Muslims who reject violence to participate in Internet forums and challenge those defending violence or martyrdom in the Australian Islamic community. Ultimately, it is Australian Muslims who are best placed to recognise and resist the dangers of jihadism and terrorism at an early stage.

The Forum would enable Australian Muslims to convey the message that Muslims support the broader Australian community by sponsoring community and educational activities that present positive examples of Australian Muslim practice. It might facilitate leadership training programs for young Muslims through such mechanisms as internships with media, business, police and parliamentarians. It might examine the utility
of developing strategies to engage Muslim parents to minimise the risks associated with parents sending messages to their children that the broader community is against them. The Forum might also examine ways to address radicalisation both on university campuses as well as in prisons. Both the European and Middle Eastern experience of Islamism demonstrate that prisons have served as incubators for extremist leaders due to their insular structure and isolation from mainstream influences. The conversion of one radicalised prisoner to violent jihad poses a serious threat to the safety of all Australians. The Forum could also examine strategies to assist Islamic schools, organisations, mosques and imams in playing their role in community engagement and combating extremism. It might consider appropriate mechanisms to license imams and promote religious instruction in English.

The AMNSF would encourage greater Muslim self-reporting of radicalisation and build communication between the Islamic community, government, police and the general community toward the goal of rejecting extremism and preventing terrorism. It could establish media programs informing the public about Australian Islamic community efforts to defeat extremism. The media could also be encouraged to provide positive role models for Muslim youth.

Community and counter-terrorism policing have conventionally been considered as opposite ends of the policing spectrum. It is, however, potentially fruitful to import the principles of community policing into national security. The Victorian Police research findings confirm the importance of integrating trust-based community policing with counter-terrorism policing, thus ensuring the flow of terrorism and counter-terrorism related information travels from communities to police and from police to communities. This aspect of policing involves public information strategies, community reassurance, response arrangements in the aftermath of a terrorist incident and consultation: ultimately it

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would seek to build genuine partnerships in counter-radicalisation programs. There exists considerable scope for deepening understanding of the linkage between community-based policing and effective counter-terrorist policies and practices.

**Policing outreach goals require the maintenance of a positive image in the community—particularly amongst youth—so that community members are able to pick up the phone to police…**

Policing outreach goals require the maintenance of a positive image in the community—particularly amongst youth—so that community members are able to pick up the phone to police, not always an easy task in communities that have ingrained suspicions towards law enforcement agencies.

In order to ensure that Muslim communities can share useful information with security agencies, there should be greater resources for more meaningful partnership with the police. Both NSW and Victoria police have already invested personnel and financial resources to positively engage the Islamic communities. Current state police resources in our major capital cities devoted to this work, however, are both modest and overstretched.

The Australian Government therefore should establish a Major Urban Counter-Terrorism Policing Program to assist state police improve their capacity to interdict violent extremism. The money would support processes to examine community perceptions of counter-terrorism work and legislation, establish a machinery of community consultation including the development of websites, media communications strategies, state police training in counter-terrorism, language and cross-cultural awareness, leadership and sporting programs for young Australian Muslims that involve working with law enforcement and other community groups. National funding might also support police recruitment from the Muslim communities and civilian positions as Muslim liaison officers. Meetings between the police and Islamic community leaders, whilst a useful trust-building exercise, are, by themselves, insufficient. Second generation Muslims do not necessarily respect their own community leaders for a range of reasons linked to the conflict of identity between traditional practice and growing up in a Western secular society. Police recruitment and outreach needs to reflect the composition of the communities where they work. This would assist in reducing the potential for alienation amongst young Australian Muslims.

**The Australian Government … should establish a Major Urban Counter-Terrorism Policing Program to assist state police improve their capacity to interdict violent extremism.**

A national funding program would facilitate police efforts to engage at risk groups before they are radicalised. Australian Government funding should be given directly to state police within broad national guidelines and a reporting framework: state police are the ones on the ground and (within general parameters) need to be able to direct resources as they see fit in this area. Funding allocations would need to reflect the fact that Australia’s largest Muslim populations are in Sydney and Melbourne.

Without long-term police engagement the only contact communities have with law enforcement is when police investigate after
an incident has occurred: this is not the way to engage with the disaffected.

An Australian Government funded Major Urban Counter-Terrorism Policing Program would help the police build local resilience amongst Australia’s Muslim communities, tackle extremism and establish trust networks between law enforcement agencies and Muslim communities.

Islamic community leaders play a crucial role in contesting and refuting the claims made for Islam and the caliphate by radical imams that sanction violence.

**Denouncing terrorism**

Many Australian Muslims have confronted radicalisation within their communities and have made it clear that they have little sympathy with groups promoting extremism. It’s critical that this effort to condemn violence and radicalism continues. Islamic community leaders play a crucial role in contesting and refuting the claims made for Islam and the caliphate by radical imams that sanction violence.

Islamic organisations, moreover, need to provide greater opportunities for their leaders to communicate more effectively and openly with the media…

Islamic organisations, moreover, need to provide greater opportunities for their leaders to communicate more effectively and openly with the media to provide rapid rebuttal and reactions to extremist sentiments and actions.

At the same time, Australian national security and community leaders need to acknowledge the Islamic communities’ contribution to protecting Australia from extremism and terrorism and resist the temptation to make exaggerated claims of threat that might alienate those groups that law enforcement and security agencies are trying to engage.

**There is no central point for information on the research undertaken both here and overseas on radicalisation and counter-radicalisation…**

**Information hub**

No Australian agency currently addresses communications and information flow between law enforcement, security agencies and Australia’s Muslim communities. There is no central point for information on the research undertaken both here and overseas on radicalisation and counter-radicalisation and the various academic and other organisations that currently conduct fieldwork in this area. A central location for information on these issues would serve the needs of security agencies and our Muslim communities.

Such a hub would not itself undertake or commission research. Instead it would operate as a networked information model hosting a website that contains online publications, (an e-library), a database of current counter-radicalisation research, including international research, information for practitioners on best practice models, findings from recent research in the field, directories of key organisations, forthcoming events and links to related sites. It might work with academic centres to distribute translated material online from Arabic and other languages on counter-radicalisation issues.
An information hub would require a small staff and should be connected with an existing organisation. The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), Australia’s national crime research agency would be a potential host. The AIC has undertaken work on the links between criminality and acts of terrorism as well as counter-terrorism financing. More importantly, it has considerable credibility amongst law enforcement agencies for its evidence-based research and its ability to turn academic research into practical guidance for law enforcement agencies.

The AIC produces various ‘fact sheets’ that have different styles and which are targeted at specific sectors. This experience could be drawn upon to produce material on counter-radicalisation. The AIC already hosts confidential websites for police: this facility could be useful for distributing material on the more sensitive aspects of counter-radicalisation.

Concluding remarks

Australian security and law enforcement agencies face enormous challenges in deterring the homegrown Islamist threat. In this regard, they share a similar challenge to that confronting law enforcement agencies in Europe, North America and Southeast Asia. The evolution of this challenge takes different forms in different regional and political environments. Nevertheless, the challenge of Islamism shares certain commonalities, both in terms of its transcending ideology and its commitment to jihadist violence.

Australian law enforcement agencies, like their British, Singaporean and Dutch colleagues face the difficult task of identifying self-radicalised ‘cleanskins’: individuals who may not be on any security or law enforcement watch list, have no links to known militant groups but who self-identify with Islamism quickly and proceed rapidly to jihadist violence. Such leaderless subversion does not necessarily require meetings with other terrorist operatives or training at an overseas camp, but can take place via the Internet or through access to a spiritual sanctioner.

... European and Southeast Asian law enforcement agencies have developed a range of strategies ... to engage proactively the Muslim community and to encourage its commitment to the wider political community.

To counter this threat, European and Southeast Asian law enforcement agencies have developed a range of strategies that involve enlarging the state’s capacity for surveillance and control of extremist sympathisers and their spiritual sanctioners, together with an evolving capacity to engage proactively the Muslim community and to encourage its commitment to the wider political community.

In developing this policy mix, Australian security agencies face a radicalised homegrown Islamism that has yet to develop the capacity of its equivalent in London, Leeds or Amsterdam. In order, therefore, to ensure that the threat is both contained and over time negated, security, police and national leaders will need to reassure the majority of Australian Muslims that they can practice their faith freely and that they have a place within a pluralist Australian society. Integrated into wider social networks, Australian Muslims are less likely to experience the rejection and alienation that Islamists seek to exploit.
Endnotes


5. There are around 15 million Muslims in Western Europe. The great majority of French Muslims (six million or about 10 percent of the population) are from North Africa. In Germany (three million or 3.6 per cent of the population) about three-quarters of the Muslim population is of Turkish origin. As noted above, most Dutch Muslims come from Turkey and Morocco. European Muslims are generally poorer and less educated than other Europeans.


7. Since September 2001, the UK Government has doubled its overall investment in police and security services to over $5 billion.

8. The UK national plan has four area ‘hubs’ that work together and are governed by a national committee, made up of the four heads of the units and chaired by Peter Clarke, Head, UK Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command. Between them they have divided the nation into areas of responsibility. This initiative underpins all UK counter-terrorism investigative efforts.

9. The NAP aims to encourage social cohesion through public education, employment and community activities. The plan is available on the Department of Immigration and Citizenship website.


11. The authors are grateful to Victoria Police for making available the research findings of their project with Monash University. The full study is to be released later this year.

12. Cultural awareness training for the police is important and not just for counter-terrorist police units. It would be counterproductive for one section of the police to be building bridges to Muslim communities, if others were unwittingly undermining these efforts.

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