

#2 - Security Threat, Fear, and Being the Adults in the Room*

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Against the national security events of the past months, the Security Profession would like to offer some thoughts to those in the community who might be wondering what it all means.

Six weeks ago Australia's national security apparatus disrupted plans by ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) sympathisers resident in Australia to select people at random and publicly behead them. Because the rule of law applies in this civilised country, unlike in ISIL occupied territory, these matters will need to be contested in open court. We are fortunate indeed to have such a system, and we should also be encouraged that the disruption operations appear to have been part of an intelligence-led, well-coordinated and professional security response. Since then, we have been exhorted basically to 'carry on and keep calm', although the national terrorism alert level has also been raised from 'medium' (an attack 'could occur') to 'high' (an attack 'is likely to occur'). This all seems appropriate, but it does not mean that we should stop thinking.

The word 'discipline' needs to be added to the discussion. Security is about 'culture', or the way that our world view predisposes us to act as individuals. We need to 'think' about these matters. Yes, we have national and state law enforcement and security authorities, and security advisors with various roles, but a secure society is first and foremost one in which individuals are disciplined in their actions and words. As individuals we need to develop an appreciation of security threats, which requires us to weigh facts rationally and not resort to impulse or kneejerk reactions. This should be no great problem for Australians – we have evolved a highly sophisticated, inclusive and egalitarian society, with a long and proud democratic tradition. But, with such good fortune comes great obligation. We must act with leadership, restraint, sophisticated strategy and unity of purpose. We in Australia are, and need to be seen to be, the 'adults in the room' – those of us with a public voice doubly so.

Recent events were not the first time that terrorist intent and planning in the community has been detected and thwarted. Alienated, angry men and women can be drawn to high-profile causes that prey on their fears, insecurities and gullibility and that offer simplistic answers to complex matters of the human condition. Evil has always been done in the name of fundamentalist, one dimensional, dumb ideologies – "four legs good, two legs bad" as coined by George Orwell in *Animal Farm*, or "Christian/Muslim/Jew good, Christian/Muslim/Jew bad". Talkback radio is replete with such messages right now. Easy jingoism is not needed and the three-word political slogan should be put away.

These are the reasons why:

ISIL will not last in any semblance of order – it will be a failed state and splinter. Yes, its destruction must be hastened, but to what degree is this to be done by external parties, and what interests exactly does direct involvement serve? Remember, that the 'Irish problem' in the end was solved by the Irish themselves. London and Washington got out of the way. Ultimately, Australia needs the Middle East region to behave in accordance with our needs, and right now, we would be well served by espionage, sabotage and cultivating the authority of friendly elements. Australia tends to do these things quite well, but a slide into conventional military operations on the ground will cost us precious lives and treasure, and may make us a bigger target for extremism. And what about the ultimate stakeholders? It is the likes of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and others that must rein in the sectarianism that has so cynically been fuelled in Iraq and Syria through proxies. It is hoped that such deep strategic thinking is informing decisions to commit external military forces, ours included.

Such considerations would be much easier were this simply a military problem. But it is not. With or without our encouragement IS will pass, but angry, alienated youth will continue to be recruited by the remaining splinter groups and opposing sectarian forces, which will just go on being funded generously by their sympathisers in the Arab world, Iran and elsewhere.

What we have seen in Sydney and Logan six weeks ago and in subsequent attacks, represents the tip of a massively complex and tricky public policy problem – a problem whose effective mitigation is long-term application of a mix of policies necessary to counter (over decades) the evolution of extremist home-grown elements. This mix of policies is commonly called ‘Countering Violent Extremism’, or CVE.

Regardless of recent events, Australia has been much more successful at integrating diverse immigrant populations than many countries, and successive governments have done a lot of work on CVE and must continue

(<http://www.ag.gov.au/NationalSecurity/Counteringviolentextremism/Pages/default.aspx>), although there meaningful discussion of these matters is currently absent in the public domain. Also, despite recent announcements, funding is still much scarcer for this ‘softer side of counter-terrorism’ than for the enforcement side. This balance must change for there to be any hope of a long-term solution to what is a multi-dimensional problem emerging in civil society. The complexity and expense of the measures needed (covering health, education, employment, opportunity, public security, community policing) is truly substantial, and in need of long-term bipartisan political will to sustain. This will not happen without a high-level of community awareness and acceptance of the complexities involved.

Government will need to do better here in terms of leading this debate and delivering multi-dimensional public policy outcomes, but ultimately, with or without leadership, how we respond is up to us as individuals.

As the peak representational group of the Security Profession, and as a key thought leader on security, we in the Australasian Council of Security Professionals make a plea: as members of the Australian community, you are responsible for your own security. You have a duty to educate yourself properly on the facts of the security threats that confront you. You need to think rationally about the salient facts (not your emotions) and not be blinded by the public circus that will continue for some time around the activities of a few dysfunctional individuals. If you panic, and blame all Muslims, the terrorists win.

Health Professionals will exhort us to educate ourselves about personal hygiene and diet, but it is the individual’s responsibility to wash and eat properly. These professionals are committed to the health of the community. We in the Security Profession are similarly committed – to the security of the community. And our message is similarly clear: educate yourselves, do not be sucked in by three word slogans and simplistic solutions for a complex set of problems that have been around at least since before WW1. Be evidence-based and rational, and act, speak and think appropriately in the tricky years ahead.

Further information on the Security Profession:

- Australian Council of Security Professionals securityprofessionals.org.au
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