

***'Prevention is better than picking up the pieces after a terrorist act'***  
***Opinion piece by Anthony Bergin***

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The Rudd government's new counter-terrorism white paper released this week puts an increasing political emphasis on the prevention of terrorist cells within Australia as a key element of our counter terrorism strategy.

The recent sentencing of five Sydney Muslim extremists convicted of conspiring to do acts in preparation for a terrorist act or acts underlines this approach with an exclamation mark: an attack in Australia could be perpetrated by home-grown terrorists.

Preventing a situation where local networks take steps to move from violent rhetoric to action remains a top terrorism concern for our security agencies. The problem in Australia, though, still appears to be an order of magnitude less than in Britain. British intelligence chiefs warned in 2007 of 200 terrorist networks, at least 2000 individuals who posed a direct security threat and perhaps 2000 as-yet unknown would-be terrorists. A variety of Australian citizens have been convicted under Australian anti-terrorism laws for activities in Australia or activities directed at Australian targets.

Fortunately it appears the handful of our home-grown extremists have lacked the necessary trade-craft to conduct sophisticated attacks.

There's much we still need to learn about how to prevent individuals from choosing the path of violence.

Most of Australia's home-grown terrorists appeared to live fairly ordinary lives in the suburbs, with family in Australia and in employment.

According to a comprehensive study on radicalisation undertaken three years ago by the New York Police Department, the home-grown threat involves a grass-roots process of radicalisation leading to local networks that operate predominantly under their own volition. Those who go on to be radicalised aren't necessarily devout Muslims or radical in any way to begin with.

They often experience some form of trigger event—such as economic struggle, social alienation, or loss of family members—that increases the person's need to establish an identity or choose which direction to follow.

They may hold political grievances, believing some Western states have set out deliberately to weaken the Islamic world.

The internet remains a powerful conduit for indoctrination and radicalisation. It has enabled terrorists to reach far more people than ever. And it's not just static websites: individuals find likeminded extremists using chat rooms and social networking sites. The final stage involves acceptance of the violent jihad mission.

To be successful we must endeavour to understand the threat of violent Islamist extremism within Australia.

We need to develop more collaborative research work in this area and continue to create new avenues for cooperation within our national security community.

It's particularly important for security agencies to encourage information exchange at the state and local levels, where often radicalisation issues are unfamiliar and complex.

Australian security officials should brief local government on the Australian government's future counter-radicalisation plans. This may include the sharing of classified material from the police and other agencies. And it will require more work on measuring progress in this area, where it's difficult to get sound indicators.

There's an implicit recognition in the terrorism white paper that we haven't done nearly enough to address underlying conditions for at-risk populations or to improve the ability of moderates to strengthen opposition to violence.

Effective counter-terrorism needs the active partnership of those to whom these policies are directed.

Sustaining our rings of defence to ensure that violent extremism doesn't take root requires extensive outreach programs to Muslim communities to develop trust about efforts to safeguard Australia from terrorism.

Recruiting more ethnic minority personnel into our police forces would help.

But this isn't just about working with Muslim moderates to develop a counter narrative to extremism and promoting cultural inclusion; it must also involve the investigation and prosecution of those who have committed terrorism offences.

The recent successful prosecution of terrorist cells here and other charges should have raised a red flag in Australia's Muslim communities.

They must try to ensure young people don't fall prey to extremist ideology. We need to engage with those groups whose work and public statements challenge violent extremism and defend shared values: the rule of law, free speech and respect for others.

While ideology is rarely the only driver for radicalisation, we shouldn't flinch from verbally confronting those promoting intolerant, anti-democratic and separatist doctrines but that fall short of advocating violence.

We have seen examples of this through the years that sow mistrust between communities.

Some groups have a divisive agenda that contributes to an environment that makes violence more acceptable. An alleged example of such a conveyor-belt group is Hizb ut-Tahrir, which introduces members to social networks that may make it easier to move from peaceful political activity to violent extremism.

The next step for the Australian government is to lay out the funding strands to support the counter-terrorism white paper's promise of new work in undermining extremist ideologies and disrupting radicalisation. While the scale of the problem here is nothing like that faced in Britain (nearly 200 terrorist convictions from 2001-08), it's worth noting that the overall budget in Britain for preventing violent extremism was £140 million in 2008-09.

Particularly important will be funding Australian and state government engagement with young people in cyberspace; that's where youth exchange views and receive much of their information.

Our authorities need to become much better than the extremists at communicating their message through the internet and new media.

In developing our counter-terrorism strategies, however, we must be very careful not to send the message that any particular religious belief is a threat to Australian national security.

Our approach must integrate Muslim communities in Australia, not alienate them.

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