



## ISIS ATTACKS IN THE WEST.

Murray Ackman

### SYNOPSIS

**ISIS has shown an increased commitment to attacks in the West. Consequently, Australia faces a very real terrorist threat. While domestic terrorism has historically originated from internal threats and grievances, ISIS has deliberately courted home grown groups, terrorist networks and lone actors as potential agents in its larger international fight. Australia therefore faces four categories of threats; the launching of an ISIS attack in Australia, existing terrorist networks, returned foreign fighters, and ISIS inspired lone actors. This poses unique challenges for law enforcement and the Australian Government in responding to each threat and actor type.**

ISIS grew out of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Its rapid rise was due to support in Iraq and territorial expansion in Syria. In Iraq increased sectarian conflict stemming from perceived mistreatment of Sunnis by the Maliki government made ISIS more appealing to the local population. Whilst other groups were forming and attempting to fight the Assad regime in Syria, ISIS developed a professional fighting force that was able to conquer and govern large tracts of land.

Building on the ideology of al-Qaeda, ISIS similarly want to create a territory under their control called a caliphate and oppose recent Western foreign policy decisions in the Middle East. ISIS furthers the immediacy of al-Qaeda's eschatological beliefs, with attacks in the West justified in the context of an impending Day of Judgement.

The terrorist attack in Paris on 13 November 2015 was the first major direct assault on the West by a large international terrorist group since September 11 2001. This was followed shortly after by the Brussels attack of 22 March 2016. This demonstrates that ISIS has increased its capacity to conduct attacks in the West. This has significant implications for the terrorist threat faced by Australia. ISIS have done what al-Qaeda have been unable to do since September 11: plan and undertake a co-ordinated attack on Western soil. This is particularly significant given the relative youth of the group which started in 2013.

The Paris and Brussels attacks reveal that the West is no longer immune from direct attacks from ISIS. In 2013, terrorist attacks by ISIS were located only in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The year after, the spread of attacks grew to include Egypt and Lebanon. Last year there was evidence of ISIS plots in 11 countries.

Even as ISIS is losing territory, resources and propaganda victories in Iraq and Syria, they are continuing with their strategy of focusing on the West. In the same week that it was [announced](#) that a US-backed alliance would attempt to liberate the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa, ISIS began a social media campaign to intimidate the West. This included taking photos of landmarks in the West along with handwritten notes presumably intended to cause intimidation.

Despite the recent reduction of territory held by ISIS in Iraq and Syria, ISIS has the international spread and resources to arrange, coordinate and execute attacks throughout the world. The number of terrorist groups around the world who have pledged allegiance to ISIS has also increased with strong evidence of ISIS-affiliated groups in 23 countries. This also includes terrorist groups that have pledged allegiance to ISIS like Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines and Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid in Indonesia. Home grown plots have originated from ISIS affiliates active in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Libya and Saudi Arabia. It is likely the threat from these types of groups will continue to escalate. This year there have been attacks by ISIS in at least nine separate countries, including in Australia's neighbour Indonesia.

Another significant risk from the rise of ISIS is the creation of domestic terrorist networks. Even if ISIS were destroyed, these networks could lie dormant for some years until there is a catalyst for an attack. The example of the town of Molenbeek in Brussels highlights this risk. [Pre-existing terrorist networks](#) supportive of al-Qaeda in the 1990's and early 2000's were allegedly accessed for the Paris and Brussels attacks. There have been similar [claims](#) made about terrorist networks in Australia, as former supporters of al-Qaeda sought to plan attacks by attempting to recruit people to ISIS.

As well as active targeting, ISIS also seeks to inspire lone actor plots. The call by ISIS on 22 September 2014 for sympathisers to directly target the West as lone actors has coincided with a [dramatic increase](#) in attacks by Islamic fundamentalists. This included an explicit reference to Australia as a target. In the

ten months since the call there were 30 jihadist plots in the West resulting in 36 deaths. In the 12 months prior to the call there were only nine attacks with four deaths. Nine western nations suffered fatal attacks in 2014, an increase of 80 per cent on the previous 12 months. This includes attacks in countries where terrorism has previously been very low, including Austria, Australia, Belgium and Canada. The Sydney Lindt Café Siege in 2014 was an example of a lone actor sympathiser. However, it does not include the growing number of foiled attacks. In the last four years in Australia there have been [23 people](#) convicted of terrorism offences, as well as numerous charged.

Countering the threat posed by different actor types requires varied responses by policy makers. International cooperation and traditional intelligence operations are necessary to prevent an attack planned and directed by ISIS. Whilst Australian geography and border security enables mitigation from the risk of individuals on terrorist watch lists arriving in Australia, recent attacks by ISIS in Belgium, France and Turkey have been conducted by nationals who have entered the country lawfully. Foiling these attacks require law enforcement approaches, with expanding police authority justified as a necessary trade-off to prevent large scale attacks. In many senses, countering this type of attack resonates with Cold War policies to prevent espionage from foreign agents active in a country.

Attacks by home grown groups can similarly be monitored by law enforcement. Despite the growing sophistication of terrorists in using encrypted communication technology, groups tend to share their plans across a variety of mediums. Furthermore, by focusing on ‘connectors’ law enforcement has greater opportunity to intercept plots. This is because personal relationships play a very significant role in jihadist terrorism. [Jason Burke](#), an expert on Islamic terrorism, has noted: “contemporary Islamic militancy is not about groups as much as about people, and personal relations.”

The importance of personal relationships also influences the response to lone actors. Whilst lone actors are the most difficult for law enforcement with limited interception opportunities as lone actors don’t need to contact others, most lone actors appear to have told at least one person of their plans prior to an attack. The government can attempt to counter all messaging by ISIS, but the government is often not the best positioned particularly in countering individual grievances related to foreign policy decisions.

Another dimension of the ISIS threat in Australia is that of returned foreign fighters who have fought for ISIS in Iraq or Syria. Returned foreign fighters who have been trained in conflict pose risks as both home grown and lone actors. The majority of terrorist attacks have no fatalities, with 50 per cent of incidents globally from 1970 to 2013 claiming [no lives](#). Over 95 per cent of all attacks have fewer than ten deaths. However, when terrorists are trained in conflict, there is the possibility for much more catastrophic levels of casualties. This is because explosives – and other weaponry that require specific

knowledge and expertise to properly employ – are more lethal than light arms. For example, it is alleged that both the Paris and Brussels attacks included terrorists who had been trained in Syria, and subsequently these were among the deadliest terrorist attacks ever seen in Europe. In contrast, the Boston Marathon bombings killed three and were conducted by two brothers who had allegedly learned bomb making from a magazine.

Australia has been viewed as vulnerable to terrorist attacks due to the large number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. The Australian Government has said there are [at least 100](#) Australians fighting as foreign fighters, and estimates are it could be over [250 people](#). Although a large aspect of government response to the threat of returned foreign fighters has been legal and focused on the police, there are also [countering violent extremism approaches](#), which attempt to divert people at-risk before they make the decision to leave. But not all returned fighters seek to become terrorists. The [International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence \(ICSR\)](#) surveyed 58 defectors from terrorist groups in Syria and found reasons for defection included; complaints about the infighting and brutality against other Muslims, the quality of life, corruption among leadership, and the prominence of un-Islamic behaviour. Despite the fact that many returned foreign fighters may be disillusioned from their experiences, they nonetheless pose a potential threat, and as such their return is likely to be monitored. While the lethality of a returning foreign fighter attack is likely to be high, this is not the largest threat group in terms of the frequency of attacks. According to research by [Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser](#) at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, there are more ISIS sympathisers who conduct attacks than returning foreign fighters.

This article has examined the domestic terrorism threat Australia and the West face from ISIS. This includes the launching of an ISIS attack in Australia, exploitation of existing terrorist networks, and attacks by returned foreign fighters and ISIS inspired lone actors. There are distinct approaches for policy makers to counter these threats, predominately in the law and order and national security realms. However these should be accompanied by broader policies which can reduce the number of people at risk of violent extremism. Research from the [Institute for Economics and Peace](#) shows that some of the drivers of terrorism in western countries include low social cohesion and alienation, as well as a perceived lack of opportunities. Therefore traditional counterterrorism approaches focussed on a security paradigm need to be supplemented with programs to counter violent extremism and a commitment to improve social cohesion. This inevitably means that the response to the terrorist threat in Australia cannot be achieved by Government alone, but instead requires a whole of community effort.