

Radicalisation and Resilience Case Study

Australia

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This case study is part of a series of in-depth reports on religiously motivated violent radicalisation - and resilience to it - in 12 countries. The series examines periods in which religious radicalisation and violence has escalated and analyses relevant policy and political discourses surrounding them. While seeking to identify factors that drove radicalisation and violence in each country, the case studies also critically assess programmes of prevention and resilience-building, identifying good practices. This series was produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

Countries covered in this series:

Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, France, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Tunisia and the United Kingdom.

<http://grease.eui.eu>



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The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

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Introduction: Overview of modern terrorism in Australia

In 2020, the current threat level in relation to the likelihood of a terrorist attack in Australia remains at 'PROBABLE', characterised by 'credible intelligence that individuals and groups have the capability and intent to conduct terrorism onshore [across] a threat spectrum that stretches from self-radicalising lone actors across the range of extremist ideologies through to experienced terrorists associated with long standing extremist groups' (ASIO 2020a). The ASIO Director-General's Annual Threat Assessment in February 2020 identified Islamist-related terrorism as a continuing source of major concern, followed by the growing terrorism threat from an extreme right that is globally networked on the web and empowered by rising intolerance 'based on race, gender and identity', including religious identities such as Islam and Judaism, across the globe (ASIO 2020).

In historical terms, however, radicalisation to violence in Australia – whether or not it has been religiously inspired or attributed – has been very low. Prior to 9/11, attacks defined as terrorism in Australia tended to be motivated by non-religious socio-political ideologies or ethnic sectarianism, confined largely to attacks on foreign or domestic government embassies or agencies. The intersection of religion and violent radicalisation did not emerge in any significant way until 9/11, and some policy and law enforcement responses tended to oversimplify the relationship between Islamic religious identity and radicalisation, taking a 'tough on terror' approach in relation to the perceived relationship between 'Islam' and 'terrorism' that some argue damaged rather than mitigated trajectories of radicalisation to violent extremism (Bull & Rane 2019) because it further strengthened perceptions that entire Muslim communities, rather than a small minority of bad actors, were being securitised (Grossman & Tahiri 2015; Lynch et al. 2015).

In the early to mid-2000s, however, a number of investigations and cases led to multiple arrests, prosecutions and convictions of Australians linked to major Al-Qa'eda-inspired plots on Australian soil, including cells uncovered by major counter-terrorism operations Pendennis (2005) and Neath (2009) (Schuurman et al. 2014; Zammit 2012). While a small proportion of Australians either trained for or became foreign fighters during the conflict in Afghanistan in the late 1990s (Zammit 2015), the rise of Islamic State (IS) in 2014 witnessed a surge in the number of Australians travelling to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq following the IS declaration of a physical caliphate in the region. Estimates put the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria at approximately 120 male combatants (Wroe and Whitbourn 2015), as well as roughly half those numbers again of women, children

and families who either made their own way independently overseas or who travelled with spouses or other relatives.

A number of male Australian foreign fighters have either died in combat overseas or, where they are dual nationals, had their Australian citizenship revoked through the *Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) 2015*. The laws underpinning this have been controversial, with the Australian government's own Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) arguing that the stripping of citizenship may inhibit successful charging and prosecution of Australian nationals for terrorist crimes and potentially fuel further terrorism risks (Karp, 2019).

However, evidence of religious motivations and rationales for Australian right-wing extremists is scant. Although the Australian Christchurch mosque shooter Brenton Tarrant referenced historical battles between Christians and the Ottoman empire in his manifesto and both his travel and online activity (Kantchev et al. 2019), on the whole, religion may be said to provide a negative rather than positive impetus for Australian right-wing extremists: they plot and act *against* religious others (Muslims, Jews) rather than *for* or on behalf of any framework driven by their own sense of religiosity. Instead, contemporary Australian right-wing extremism has tended instead to cluster around cultural superiority (which may theoretically include religion), racial superiority, anti-Islam, anti-Semitic, anti-government and neo-Nazi ideological tributaries (Campion 2019; Peucker, Smith & Iqbal 2018).

Australia currently lists 26 organisations as proscribed terrorist organisations. All but one of these (the Kurdish PKK) are Islamist groups. They include internationally well-known groups such as Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, various al-Qaeda and Islamic State franchises in different parts of the world, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab in Africa, and a range of other regional groups in the Middle East, Southeast and South Asia (Australian Government, 2019). The absence of any right-wing extremist groups on this list points to several factors, including the fact that they are 'difficult to penetrate, aware of covert monitoring technologies and, from a law enforcement perspective, much of what they do is not illegal' (Williams, 2019). Moreover, those on the Australian extreme right who are alleged to have proceeded to attack planning and execution have tended to do so as lone or small-cell actors allied with broad transnational ideological grievances and frameworks, rather than conducting terrorist attacks in the name of a particular identified group.

Methodology

The methodology employed for the following discussion and analysis relies on desk-based research and review of the academic literature (scholarly peer-reviewed articles, chapters and books), grey literature (policy documents, parliamentary briefing notes and research reports), court documents (case summaries and sentencing hearing remarks by trial judges), media articles, and previous research reports and data gathered and

produced for other elements of the GREASE project. All materials consulted and cited are open-source and publicly available.

Interviews for this research with government and community stakeholders were initially planned but could not be conducted online following the restrictions imposed by COVID in Australia commencing in March 2020 because of the sensitivity of the subject matter. The methodology was approved by the Deakin University Ethics Committee.

Conceptualisations of radicalisation

The ways in which religiously-inspired or attributed radicalisation has been conceptualised in Australia both by the state and those who commit terrorist attacks is complex and has shifted over time. Australian community perspectives have also offered varying conceptualisations of radicalisation as a process (Tahiri and Grossman 2013). However, there has always been a consistent focus by the state at the conceptual level on a) balancing democratic freedom of thought and association with addressing risks and threats from the 'violent' dimension of violent extremism, and 2) the importance of early intervention in violent radicalisation processes through involving civil society organisations and solutions.

In this sense, we may say that 'radicalisation' has always been conceptualised by the state through two lenses in Australia: that of counter-terrorism, on the one hand, and that of countering violent extremism (CVE) on the other. While the balance between the two has shifted or come into conflict at various points, both feed into how radicalisation is conceptualised and acted upon. Community conceptualisations of radicalisation, by contrast, have inclined more consistently towards CVE-based ideas around what causes religiously-inspired or attributed radicalisation and how we should address this through prevention and intervention measures (Tahiri and Grossman 2013, Grossman and Tahiri 2015).

State-based conceptualisations of radicalisation and religion

Australia is a non-unitary state comprising both Commonwealth (federal) and eight State and Territory levels of government. The nation's official definitions of radicalisation and violent extremism are widely shared across these different levels. The Department of Home Affairs, which designs and delivers national policy on countering violent extremism (CVE) in Australia¹ through, amongst other channels, its [Living Safe Together](#) program, defines radicalisation to violence in the following way:

Radicalisation happens when a person's thinking and behaviour become significantly different from how most of the members of their society and community view social issues and participate politically. Only small numbers of people radicalise and they can be from a diverse range of ethnic, national, political and religious groups. As a

¹ Dept. of Home Affairs 2019, [https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/national-security/countering-extremism-and-terrorism/countering-violent-extremism-\(cve\)](https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/national-security/countering-extremism-and-terrorism/countering-violent-extremism-(cve))

person radicalises they may begin to seek to change significantly the nature of society and government. However, if someone decides that using fear, terror or violence is justified to achieve ideological, political or social change – this is violent extremism.

Exactly what influences individuals to go down a path of using or supporting violence to seek change can be difficult to determine, but there can be a number of factors. The radicalisation process is unique to each person who undergoes it, and in most cases will not cause serious harm. In exceptional circumstances, however, the decisions made by a person radicalising can result in a serious and lethal act of violent extremism. Those who radicalise and display threatening behaviour, incite hatred or promote the use of violence for their cause require some form of intervention. This may come from family, religious or community leaders or law enforcement. (Living Safe Together 2020a)

Violent extremism is defined by the Australian Government's Living Safe Together CVE program as 'the use or support of violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals', and stress is placed on the fact that radicalisation *without* violent goals or actions does not necessarily lead to violence (Living Safe Together 2020b). While religious ideologies or beliefs are mentioned as part of a suite of potential drivers that can inform radicalisation trajectories, more prominence is given to political than religious drivers. There has also been a recent shift toward de-emphasising Islamic religiosity in favour of broadening an understanding that different religions can feature in radicalised narratives and pathways, as this example from the Living Safe Together 'What is violent extremism?' brochure suggests:

Ideological violent extremism can also be motivated by religious beliefs. In this instance the underlying motivation is also generally political, but is justified using interpretations of traditional religious texts and teachings, or following guidance from influential people here and overseas. In Australia, acts of violence have been committed in the name of many different religions. They have often been planned by small groups or individuals inspired by overseas organisations such as al-Qaeda and ISIL. An example of an individual motivated to violent action by an interpretation of religious beliefs is Christian fundamentalist and anti-abortionist Peter James Knight, who killed one person in an attack on an abortion clinic in Melbourne in 2001. (Living Safe Together 2020b)

Similarly, the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO 2020b), the nation's chief domestic intelligence agency, refers to 'politically or religiously motivated grievances' and also to 'communal violence' motivated by 'historical conflicts between different ethnic and religious groups' in discussing radicalisation to violence.

At the state level, a report commissioned by the New South Wales (NSW) Government in 2016 noted that 'political and religious ideologies are not mutually exclusive', and that 'religious violence, although justified using interpretations of traditional religious texts or teachings, or guidance from influential people, can nevertheless be politically motivated at its core' (Angus 2016). And in community terms, this was also a view shared by

participants in first national study on community perceptions of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism in Australia (Tahiri and Grossman 2013), which found that many people were worried that ordinary Australian Muslims were being misled by religious influencers who advocated varieties of 'political Islam' or forms of Islamic heterodoxy (Hellyer and Grossman 2019) that exploited or manipulated the ignorance and lack of education of their followers.

There has also been an accompanying focus in Australian state-based conceptual and policy thinking on the social-psychological dimensions of radicalisation to violence, including a focus on fixated threat assessment, in which religious sentiment or framing is seen to play an enabling or legitimating role for the adoption of violent solutions to political, social or personal grievances but is not ascribed any direct causal power (Roy 2010, 2017; Grossman et al. 2018; Mental Health Professionals Network 2019).

The conceptualisation of religiously inspired or attributed radicalisation that emerges from these statements confirms that Australian policy thinking and analysis on violent radicalisation largely sees this as a multifactorial process in which various elements converge to enable and promote the adoption of violent radicalisation, with the role of political grievances and political ideologies more prominent than either religious or single-issue drivers.

This accords in part with terrorism scholar Martha Crenshaw's observation that analyses of terrorist groups' motivations need to be mindful of the risks of overestimating 'the effect of religious beliefs as a cause of terrorism and a cause of lethality' when few groups are able to be characterised as other than having motives in which religious and either nationalist or other secularist goals co-exist (Crenshaw 2007). It also aligns with Lorne Dawson's (2018) position that a "both/and" approach is more realistic and helpful than an "either/or" choice' in terms of analysing religiosity's relationship to non-religious drivers for violent radicalisation. In effect, Australian public discourse on the relationship between religion and radicalisation largely accords with Hellyer and Grossman's (2019) observation that, while it is 'theoretically and empirically unsound to blame any specific religion or religious faith systems in general for radicalisation to violence...it is equally unsound to ignore the ideational and ideological meanings assigned to religiously inspired or justified violence when violent actors themselves attribute their intent and action to such...beliefs' (Hellyer and Grossman 2019, p. 24).

Nevertheless, this view is not uniformly shared either by popular discourse or by mainstream media, which has concentrated on the relationship of violent radicalisation to Islamism. While there is heterogeneity in how different sectors of Australian society view this relationship, the role of populist-oriented mainstream media outlets in particular has continued to link 'Islam' and 'terrorism' in ways that have stirred or accentuated problematic constructions of Australian Muslim life and belief, with predictable negative impacts on social cohesion and sense of belonging for Australian Muslims in these communities (Bull and Rane 2019; Grossman et al. 2019). Moreover, politicians and ministers from various political parties have also periodically dog-

whistled around the relationship between Islam and terrorism in pursuit of various political and electoral agendas, including targeting Lebanese Muslims as terrorists (Snow, 2016) and, more recently, equating the threat of far-left-wing terrorism (based on nil incidents in Australia) with 'Islamic' terrorism (Murphy and Remeikis 2020).

Terrorist actors' conceptualisations of radicalisation and religion in Australia

When it comes to how Australian violent radical actors themselves understand the relationship between religion and radicalised violence, however, the picture becomes more complicated. As Porter and Kebbell (2011) have noted, while 'aspects of religion and religious rhetoric' have frequently been used by Australian Islamist extremists, this rhetoric is more often aligned with heterodox interpretations that support and legitimate extremist ideology, rather than mainstream Islamic doctrine. This view is supported by Australian Muslim mainstream rejection of those who advocate such interpretations, a feature in several cases of violent radicalisation in Australia. For example, the radical Islamist self-taught cleric Abdul Nacer Benbrika, who led the Al-Qa'eda-linked terrorist cell operating across Melbourne and Sydney that resulted in Operation Pendennis (2005), ran religious classes for his young followers at his home after being excluded from a local mainstream mosque because of his extremist views (Supreme Court of Victoria VSC 21, para. 13).

In other cases, the links between religious faith and violent radicalisation have been even more tenuous or difficult to unpack. The most striking example concerns Man Haron Monis, the perpetrator of the fatal 2014 Lindt Café siege in Sydney, who attempted to link his actions during the hostage crisis he initiated to support for violent radical Islamism. Monis had previously claimed political asylum in Australia on the basis of his opposition to the Iranian government, and attempted without success to establish himself as a religious Shia leader in Sydney, but subsequently pivoted toward Sunni Islam and allegedly attempted to contact Islamic State shortly before mounting the Lindt Café attack. He was also at various points a self-proclaimed 'spiritual healer', attempted to join an outlaw motorcycle club, and fabricated his status as an Islamic cleric. He had multiple consultations with health professionals concerning mental health issues and became increasingly focused on political activism in relation to Middle Eastern conflicts.

Monis had previously come to the attention of authorities as the result of a sustained letter-writing campaign targeting elected officials, combined with criminal charges relating to the death of his ex-wife. Despite the presence of multiple sequential and convergent vectors that can help explain at least in part his trajectory toward the Lindt Café siege – including a long history of mental health issues, criminal charges and political obsessions – the coronial inquest into the Lindt Café siege continued to categorise Monis as a violent actor who could serve to inspire other 'religious fanatics' (State Coroner of NSW 2017, p. 11).

Similarly, Yacqub Khayre, the perpetrator of Melbourne's Brighton siege in 2017, was originally arrested and charged in 2009 as part of the Operation Neath suite of arrests, which had focused on an Al-Shabaab-linked plot to attack the Holsworthy Army Barracks

in Sydney. Khayre had a long history of substance abuse and criminal offences (Doherty 2017). Both during and following his arrest and imprisonment, he was reportedly denied opportunities to participate in prison-based rehabilitation programs for terrorist offenders in Victoria, which include religious guidance and mentoring available through the Victorian corrections system's Community Integrated Support Program (CISP) (Houston and Donnelly 2017; State of Victoria 17, p. 50). During the Brighton siege, in statements made to police during the Brighton event, Khayre referenced both Islamic State and Al-Qa'eda, and it is unclear to what extent he understood the differences between these groups (Islamic Council of Victoria 2017).

Such histories and statements by Australian perpetrators on the role of religion in fostering their radicalisation to violence reveal no common or consistent pattern. Each declared their actions to be explicitly linked to support for radical Islamist thought and movements, and invoked religiosity in some form or other, but not in ways that allow for easy generalisations or consistent conceptualisations of how religion and radicalisation intersect. The role and influence of religiously-based social networks also differed across the three. For Benbrika, the breakaway group he formed was in part a response to the widening gap between his own heterodox beliefs about Islam and those of the broader religious community in which he circulated. For Man Monis, there were no sustaining religious social networks at all. For Khayre, his exposure to radicalised Islamist ideology occurred not in Melbourne through local social or religious networks, but in Somalia through contact with Al-Shabaab members when he travelled there in 2009, shaping his subsequent involvement in the Australian plot targeted by Operation Neath.

Other Australian violent extremists have forged their relationship between religion and violent extremism in yet more diverse ways. In the case study below, we examine in detail the radicalisation of a young person associated with the Anzac Day Plot through his links with the Al-Furqan bookshop and network in Melbourne's southeast, in which a significant number of key Australian religiously-based violent extremists were also involved over time. Analysis of the trajectory of one of the Anzac Day plot's key players helps provide further insight into the complex ways in which a conceptual resort to 'religion' alone cannot adequately account for the trajectories of religiously inspired or attributed violent radicalisation in Australia.

Country Background

Historical context of religion in Australia

Australia is a former British colony that became an independent nation in 1901, with a current population of just over 25 million people from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds speaking over 300 different languages in the home (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017a). Approximately 30% of Australians currently were born overseas. While Australia now has a global reputation as a successful multicultural society, it has also been characterised by a significant degree of racism in its past history. For example, the popularly dubbed 'White Australia' immigration policy ([Immigration](#)

Restriction Act of 1901), which barred immigration by non-Europeans to the country, was only repealed in 1973. In addition, tensions around the recognition of the history and experience of colonial violence targeting Indigenous people remain unresolved. Historically, Indigenous worldviews and spiritual practices were systematically ignored or devalued and many Indigenous people were forced to 'convert' to Christianity. Between 1910 and 1970 many hundreds of children of mixed heritage were forcibly removed from their parents in order to educate and assimilate them into a Christian worldview.

Australia's colonial legacy is also reflected in its historically Christian-majority institutional character, primarily dominated by Roman Catholicism and Protestant denominations. While Christianity was dominant, from the Australian gold rush period in the 1850s onwards, a diverse range of people from other ethnic and faith backgrounds came to Australia and stayed on to resettle, including significant numbers of Chinese Buddhists, Muslim and Hindu South Asians and Central Asians. Muslim cameleers from the Middle East were involved in establishing Islam in Australia in the 19th century. Today, an increasing number of Australians are moving towards secularism, although Christianity remains the primary religious affiliation of those claiming a religious identity (52%) (Grossman et al. 2019).

Religion and cultural diversity

Nevertheless, since the post-war period Australia has been characterised by increasingly high levels of cultural diversity through successive waves of economic, skilled migrant and humanitarian refugee immigration intakes. Australia is now a resolutely multi-faith society (Bouma and Halafoff 2017). After Christianity, the next two largest religions in Australia are Islam (2.6%) and Buddhism (2.4%), while 30% of the population identify with 'no religion', and other faiths comprise less than ten per cent of the population (Grossman et al. 2019, pp. 11-12). There is also a rise amongst Australian youth identifying with forms of 'spiritual' rather than organised religious belief systems and practices (Singleton et al. 2019).

In line with global trends, there has been a rise of evangelical churches and adherents associated with Pentecostalism, Charismatic Christian and other new Christian movements (Hunt 2017). The increase in religious diversity in contemporary Australia has not been uncontested. This challenge has largely come from traditional Australian conservatives and the more recent 'alt-right', who have mobilised around anti-Islam narratives and the purported deterioration of 'Christian values' in public, cultural and educational life. While places of worship have been largely uncontroversial in Australian everyday life, more recently Islamic mosques and Jewish synagogues have seen increases in targeted hate crimes as far-right and alt-right public discourse and protests have accelerated.

Governance of religion

Australia is currently home to more than 120 religious groups (ABS 2016) and has a dynamic faith-based and multi-faith sector, with established religious bodies and

organisations playing a significant social role beyond formal structures of worship that extends to the provision of health care, aged care, education, and cultural and social welfare services.

The multicultural, multi-faith nature of Australian society has created both incentives and opportunities for multi-faith cooperation and dialogue between Australia's religious communities and secular society, and also with each other. These connections both reflect and also cut across ethno-culturally diverse communities. A number of non-government organisations advocate for, provide policy advice on, and promote activities that enhance multi-faith tolerance, dialogue and understanding.

Australia's Constitution specifically prohibits the establishment of an official national religion. The Australian Constitution further prohibits interference in the free exercise of any religion based on the principle that religious beliefs and practices are voluntary and private matters for its citizens, and that people should be free to choose to exercise or refrain from exercising any religious beliefs or practices, as long as these do not interfere with the human rights or freedoms of others or with the laws of the nation.

While prohibiting interference in religious practice, the Australian Constitution does not provide positive Constitutional protection for religious rights and freedoms, which has led some to argue that the Constitution does not adequately protect and assert the religious freedom and anti-discrimination rights of citizens (Meyerson 2009). This has meant that the governance of religion has been managed, in reality, at the complex intersection of a range of other legal and governance frameworks.

These debates about religious protection were intensified in the wake of a national referendum on marriage equality in 2017, in which 61% of Australians supported the passage of the Marriage Equality Act, legally recognising the marriages of same-sex couples. This result was perceived by some as having the potential to impinge on the 'right to discriminate' on religious grounds by various religious denominations. This led the Commonwealth Government to commission a Religious Freedom Review, which published its final report in May 2018. The mandate of the Review was to 'examine and report on whether Australian law (Commonwealth, State and Territory) adequately protects the human right to freedom of religion' (Religious Freedom Review Expert Panel 2018, p. iii). Twenty recommendations were made by the Religious Freedom Review Expert Panel, fifteen of which were accepted by the Commonwealth Government directly or in principle. Among the recommendations accepted was the need to develop a Religious Discrimination Bill to provide comprehensive protection against discrimination based on religious belief or activity and to establish a Freedom of Religion Commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission. These initiatives are still ongoing.

Drivers of religiously-inspired radicalisation and assessment

Islamist violent extremism in Australia

As noted above, the dominant trend in Australia has been that of Islamist-inspired and coordinated terrorism; the Christchurch attack in New Zealand, committed by a born-

and-bred Australian targeting Muslims, evidences the growth in right-wing extremist threats from Australian nationals but not yet one conducted on Australian soil. The rise of Al-Qa'eda, particularly following the attacks of September 11, 2001, saw a small number of Australians involved in overseas training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as the conviction of Faheem Khalid Lodhi, convicted in 2006 for 'the intent of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause, namely violent jihad' by planning to attack multiple sites including national electricity grids and Australian Defence Force bases and barracks (Wallace, 2006). Following 9/11 but prior to 2012, the bulk of terrorist plots were linked to or inspired by Australian connections with Al-Qa'eda, the Indonesian-based Jemaah Islamiah, Pakistan's Lashkar e-Tayyiba and the Somalia-based Al-Shabaab (Zammit 2012). Significant pre-2012 Islamist plots focusing on major Australian population targets included significant disrupted planned attacks in 2005 and 2009: Operation Pendennis, led by self-declared imam Abdul Nacer Benbrika, remains Australia's largest terrorist plot, involving 22 people across two terrorist cells in Sydney and Melbourne in 2005; also significant was 2009's Operation Neath, resulting in 5 arrests, targeting the Holsworthy Army Barracks in Sydney, and the Operation Appleby raids focused on Australians allegedly involved in Islamic State activity in 2014.

The rise of Islamic State (IS) in 2014 led, as elsewhere in the world, to a surge in religiously attributed support for violent action amongst Australians who were either already radicalised or who were inspired to violent radicalisation by the early successes of IS in seizing territory in Syria and Iraq for its self-proclaimed caliphate. Since 2014, there have been 16 'major disruption operations in relation to imminent attack planning' and 7 terrorist attacks targeting people on Australian soil (National Terrorism Threat Advisory System 2020). These include major attack plans such as the ANZAC Day plot (2015), the Christmas Day plot (2016) and the Sydney Airport/Etihad Airways bomb plot (2017). Not all of the challenges arising from the global reach of Islamic State into Australia involved direct acts of violence, however; the same period saw the emergence of digitally enabled Australian Islamic State social influencers with substantial online followings such as Musa Cerantonio, identified by ICSR in 2014 as one of the two most globally prominent 'spiritual authorities' and influencers within Syrian foreign fighter networks (Carter et al. 2014).

In addition, the rise of Islamic State wrought changes to how Islamist plots were conceptualised and conducted in Australia. Zammit summarises these changes in the table below:

Table 7: IS-Associated plots (2014-2018) in Australia compared to earlier jihadist plots

IS-associated (2014-2018) plots in Australia compared to earlier jihadist plots	
2000-2013 (jihadism pre-IS)	2014-2018 (IS era)
Few plots (4 main cases)	Many plots (possibly over 20)
All plots 'failed'	Seven plots 'successful' (caused injuries or deaths)
Ambitious planning	Usually simple planning
Usually involved explosives	Usually knives or firearms
Often large cells	Often lone individuals or pairs
Range of public targets	Often targeted police as well as the general public*
No women charged	Multiple women convicted
No children charged	Multiple children convicted
Often involved returnees	Almost never involved returnees (one exception)

Source: Andrew Zammit, www.avert.net.au, 13 March 2019.

Combined with the trend toward lone or small-group, low-tech vehicle-borne or edged-weapon attacks in the IS era, and the drop in age range for recent terrorism offences, this was the case with the Bourke Street vehicular attack in 2018; the stabbing attack by a young female international student in a Melbourne suburb, also in 2018, and the 18-year-old who attempted to stab two Melbourne police officers in 2014 following the cancellation of his passport. However, other recent lone-actor attacks have involved firearms: these include the 15-year-old who in 2015 shot NSW Police accountant Curtis Cheng outside a police station (three other men were also charged and convicted in relation to Jabar's actions),² the Lindt Café siege (2014) and the Brighton siege (2017). The Lindt Café siege, however, created significant controversy over its disputed status as a genuine Islamist-inspired terror attack (Kidd 2015).

Estimates put the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria at approximately 120 male combatants (Wroe and Whitbourn 2015), as well as roughly half those numbers of women, children and families who either made their own way independently overseas or who travelled with spouses or other relatives. A number of Australian foreign fighters and supporters have either died in combat overseas or had their citizenship stripped through terrorism laws introduced in 2014 and subsequently, which amongst other things criminalised the presence of Australian nationals in foreign incursion zones related to combat and recruitment. These laws have been enormously controversial, with Muslim community leaders boycotting consultations with government and the Australian Government's own intelligence agency, ASIO, arguing that the stripping of citizenship may inhibit successful charging and prosecution of Australian nationals for terrorist crimes and potentially fuel further terrorism risks. Instead, they have called for discretionary powers to cancel citizenship where this has been deemed to be in the national interest (Karp 2019).

There are further challenges (Grossman and Barolsky 2019) associated with the Australian government's resistance to repatriating the roughly 70 women and children

² A full list of terrorist violent incidents, proven terrorist plots and alleged terrorist plots from September 2014 to August 2019 appears in Zammit, 'Proven and alleged terrorist plots in Australia since September 2014', <https://andrewzammit.org/2019/05/17/proven-and-alleged-terrorist-plots-in-australia-since-september-2014/>.

who travelled to or were born in former Islamic State territories and who are now interned in highly precarious circumstances in Syrian holding camps, where the ability to contain and support women and children is at ever-increasing risk because of ongoing volatility in the region. The Australian Government has argued that it is too difficult and risky for Australian personnel to enter the region for extractions, and, while more sympathetic to the plight of children who cannot be held responsible for their parents' decisions, has questioned why Australia should take back women who may continue to be active supporters or actors motivated by Islamic State ideology (Albeck-Ripka 2019). This policy stance has created considerable debate and disquiet amongst Australian public commentators, many of whom argue that such an approach plays into the hands of terrorist recruitment propaganda, risks creating a new generation of violent extremists (Stenger & True 2019) and fails to meet its international and constitutional legal obligations by taking responsibility for its own nationals, including children (Rothwell & Rubenstein 2019).

Gender and Australian violent extremism

There have also been interesting trends in relation to the roles of Australian women in both supporting violent extremism since 2014. A study by Grossman, Carland, Tahiri and Zammit (2018) found that Islamic State's appeal for women was bound up with joining a movement that combined religious and political agendas and that sought to involve women in a state-building enterprise with clearly defined roles and responsibilities that enabled them to participate meaningfully through social influence and social action. Although Australian women's involvement in violent extremism has remained low to date and confined largely (though not exclusively) to Islamic State-linked or inspired activity, their numbers have continued to grow overall compared to previous mobilisations of Australian women in radicalised violence.

There was little difference identified in the push and pull factors between men and women, but there were differences in the gendered experience and expression of these drivers and in pathways – while most Australian men radicalise to violence through social networks of other men, women have by and large tend to enter violent extremist networks through their relationships with men, going on thereafter to form radicalised social networks with other women once they become active. The Grossman et al. (2018) study summarised these drivers and pathways as follows:

Drivers (push factors)

- *Grievance* (sense of personal, social and/or political victimisation, loss of dignity, sense of injustice)
- *Lack of social connection/belonging* (within family, community, broader society)
- *Perceived threat* (to identity, culture, religious belief systems)
- *Vulnerability* (lack of knowledge and/or skills; social isolation; lack of confidence)
- *Idealism and conviction* (positive social change; defending beliefs; protecting or helping others)

Attractors (pull factors)

- *Social influence by and of others* (empowerment, status, agency)

- *Freedom to* gain control, explore identities, challenge boundaries, drive change and transformation
- *Freedom from* uncertainty, values- and gender-based conflicts, constraints or demands
- *Affirmation* through exclusivist modes of belonging and sense of fraternity/sisterhood/solidarity/collectivism
- *Legitimation* of nexus between 'feeling' and 'doing' - transforming emotions into purposive action

Pathways

- *Relational*: For women, primarily but not exclusively significant male influence *plus* drivers and attractors; for men, primarily but not exclusively significant male influence from mentors or peers
- *Ideological*: Political, religious, social convictions about world events and social change
- *Environmental*: Primarily but not exclusively social media influence for women, and social networks *plus* social media influence for men, *plus* drivers and attractors

Islamophobia in Australia

Islamophobia has also played a role in the drivers of radicalisation to violence. The broad and pervasive policy and media focus on Islamist violent extremism over the last two decades – more recently combined with rising Australian disquiet about immigration and population control that can reflect ‘deeper ambivalence’ regarding non-European and especially African and Muslim-background immigrants (Cave and Kwai 2019) – has resulted in significant tensions at times between government and Australian Muslim civil society organisations and communities who reject the equation of Islam as a belief system with radicalisation, and continuously point out that the vast majority of Australian Muslims are peaceful everyday Australians who both benefit from and contribute significantly to the health and wellbeing of the Australian economy and broader society (Dunn et al. 2015).

It is important to note that attitudes towards Muslims in Australia are ‘not uniform’ and have varied over time. However, since 9/11 in particular, their place in Australian society ‘has been increasingly questioned’ (Akbarzadeh 2016), but the response to this has overall been one more characterised by resilience than by disaffection (Dunn et al. 2015). Having said that, the sense of belonging and religious and cultural freedoms experienced by Muslim communities, as by other minority groups in Australia, are to a significant extent mediated and curtailed by experiences of racism, discrimination and negative or sensationalised media discourses that contribute to Islamophobia in Australia. This produces contradictory discourses, so that ‘on the one hand Muslims are seen as not “fitting into” Australia [and] on the other they are prevented from belonging through racism’ (Dunn et al. 2015, p. 39).

As in other Western countries, the ways in which world events such as 9/11 have been narrated and interpreted have further augmented hostile attitudes towards Muslim minorities, who have been stigmatised and securitised as ‘suspect communities’ (Abbas

2012; Bloul 2008; Tahiri and Grossman 2013; Cherney and Murphy 2016). Anti-Islam sentiments and actions have, as in other countries, increased in both vigour and visibility in Australia. This has been fortified further by the recent vocal rise in both online and offline settings of far-right groups, which Akbarzadeh (2016) argues creates a 'closed loop' of 'rising Islamophobia, criticism of multiculturalism and Muslim alienation' which in turn nurtures the narrative that Muslims do not belong in Australia.

Australian approaches to counter-terrorism since 9/11 have also been found to have contributed to the sense of being targeted as suspect by increasing perceptions of Muslims as threats (Kabir 2007; Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security 2006). This was further amplified following the introduction of new counter-terrorism laws in 2014 that sought to strengthen police and intelligence agency powers for the purpose of digital disruption, preventing travel to foreign conflict zones designated 'declared areas' for terrorist activity, and broadening crimes related to terrorism to include advocacy for terrorism. This suite of law reform also included new powers related to passport suspensions, control orders, the discontinuance of social welfare payments and the retention of telecommunications metadata (Griffiths 2015). While these laws are threat-agnostic in theory, the persistence of their application to Muslim-background Australians has been consistently critiqued (Lynch et al. 2015). Taken together, the 'tough on terror' approach adopted by the Abbott Coalition Government during this period was argued to have actually damaged rather than mitigated trajectories of radicalisation to violent extremism (Bull and Rane 2019) because it further strengthened perceptions that entire communities, rather than a small minority of bad actors, were being securitised (Grossman and Tahiri 2015; Lynch et al. 2015).

The exploitation of Islamophobia for political gain – particularly as the public tenor of Australian political debate has deteriorated – has also contributed to this phenomenon. This has been accompanied by documented rises in hate speech and hate incidents directed at Muslims (Iner 2019), largely on social media but also in the physical world, creating disturbing echo chambers and permissiveness for violence that justify and amplify Islamophobic discourse. These findings have in turn brought into sharp focus the issue of Australia's unsuccessful efforts to weaken hate speech laws in 2014 and again in 2017 through proposing to amend Section 18C of the Australian Racial Discrimination Act (Mao 2019), a position now abandoned following the Christchurch massacre.

Despite these challenges, Australian Muslim communities, while ethnically and culturally very diverse, continue to show overall high levels of belief in 'Islam's compatibility with Australian norms and Muslim's support for diversity' despite experiences of Islamophobia 'is revelatory of resilience' (Dunn et al. 2015, p. 39). These findings suggest that, while Islamophobia creates an environment in which increased vulnerability to radicalisation may occur in conjunction with a range of other factors, the vast majority of Australian Muslims have shown significant resilience in forestalling the translation of negative experiences into ideological disaffection with Australian society by adopting support for radicalised violence.

State and non-state approaches to countering violent extremism

State-based approaches to countering violent extremism

In the wake of 9/11, Australia developed robust counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) policies and programs designed to improve community safety and to focus on preventing the development and uptake of radicalised ideologies that supported political and social violence. An important part of any country's policy environment on violent radicalisation lies in how it defines the terms and parameters of its approach, which is then used to develop and justify particular policy settings. Australia uses the following definitions of *violent extremism*, *radicalisation* and *countering violent extremism* in setting its policy and program directions, as described in its most recent Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2015):

Violent extremism is the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals. This includes terrorism and other forms of politically motivated and communal violence. All forms of violent extremism seek change through fear and intimidation rather than through peaceful means. If a person or group decides that fear, terror and violence are justified to achieve ideological, political or social change, and then acts accordingly, this is violent extremism (Council of Australian Governments 2015, p. 7).

Radicalisation happens when a person's thinking and behaviour become significantly different from how most of the members of their society and community view social issues and participate politically. Only small numbers of people radicalise and they can be from a diverse range of ethnic, national, political and religious groups (Council of Australian Governments 2015, p. 7).

Countering violent extremism (CVE) is defined as 'a willingness to use unlawful violence or support the use of violence by others to promote a political, ideological or religious goal (Council of Australian Governments 2015, p. 7).

This policy framework, particularly in relation to CVE, has consistently focused on combatting ideological support for *violence-based beliefs, behaviours and actions* rather than on radical or extremist ideas or ideologies themselves, in contrast to countries like the UK, where extremist beliefs are the main focus of policy definitions as set out in the UK's 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy (HM Government 2015) and the newly established Commission for Countering Extremism.

A decade ago, a 2010 Australian Counter-Terrorism White Paper argued that, due to a variety of local, global and regional factors, terrorism had become 'a persistent and permanent feature' (Australian Government 2010, p. ii) of the nation's security environment. This position dates back both to 9/11 but also to the Indonesian violent Islamist group Jemaah Islamiyah's Bali bombing attack in 2002, in which 88 Australians were amongst the 202 people killed at a popular entertainment venue frequented by Australian tourists. The Bali bombings prompted to Australia revised its counter-terrorism policy and legislation. In April 2002, the Prime Minister, State Premiers and Chief Ministers met at a National Summit on Terrorism and Multi-Jurisdictional Crime,

where the need for a stronger framework to meet the emerging challenge of combating terrorism led to a National Counter-Terrorism Committee (NCTC) (now expanded to the ANZCTC to include New Zealand) being established within the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle & Zammit 2016). A National Counter-Terrorism Strategy was released by the NCTC in 2005 and has been updated periodically since then, with a new review of the latest version in 2015 currently underway.

The legislative landscape of Australian counter-terrorism

Initially, Australia's primary focus was on implementing new legislation, increased funding to intelligence agencies and military support for operations in Afghanistan. From 2001—2014, the overall budget of the domestically focused Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) was increased more than fivefold, along with significantly increased funding to the Office of National Assessments (ONA), the internationally focused Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) (Commonwealth of Australia 2015, p. 3).

Revisions to existing legislation such as amendments to Chapter 5.3 of the Criminal Code and new legislation such as the Anti-Terrorism Act (2003) were introduced to strengthen existing legislation that criminalised terrorist acts and support for terrorism. In 2014, additional new legislation provided additional powers to national security and established, for example, procedures for preventative detention and control orders to restrict the movement of those allegedly associated with terrorism as well as enabling the proscription of terrorist organisations (Council of Australian Governments 2015).

Further changes to Australia's counter-terrorism legislation in 2014 followed the emergence and rise of Islamic State (IS), which saw unprecedented numbers of Australian nationals, many of them young men and women, travel or attempt to travel to join the self-declared Islamic State caliphate in Syria and Iraq. The most significant change was the passing in November 2014 of the *Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Foreign Fighters) Act 2014*, which amended 22 Acts to respond to the threat posed by Australians engaging in, and returning from, conflicts in foreign states (Commonwealth of Australia 2015, p. 8).

The criminalisation of foreign fighters serving as combatants in foreign territories is relatively straightforward, though not free from debates about the impact of these laws on returning foreign fighters (Zammit 2015); less clear are the challenges posed by those who may be subject to criminal sanctions for travelling to prohibited declared territories, including children who are unable exercise control of their movements and women who may have been coerced into such travel by spouses, parents, siblings or other family members. In addition, laws enabling revocation of Australian citizenship for dual nationals who were proven to have engaged in terrorist acts, served in an 'enemy army' or a 'declared terrorist organisation', or a number of other specified offences was introduced in 2015, occasioning significant concern and criticism from human rights and civil rights organisations (Human Rights Law Centre 2019).

Australian Government CVE approaches

As the Australian legislative, institutional and policy environment has continued to evolve in relation to counter-terrorism measures, there has been parallel development of more socially proactive, non-coercive approaches to preventing or mitigating the risks of violent radicalisation through countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes and initiatives, in line with international developments elsewhere. This occurred particularly following several high-profile instances of 'home-grown' terrorism in Western countries in the mid-2000s (Harris-Hogan et al. 2016).

Australia was an early adopter of CVE approaches in practice as well as in name. From 2005 onwards, the Australian Government adopted measures that were 'effectively the precursors to Australia's current CVE approach' (Harris-Hogan et al. 2016, p. 13; Zammit 2015), including the release of a *National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony, and Security* in 2007 as part of the country's national strategic framework to address terrorism. The NAP's stated objectives were to 'address the underlying causes of terrorism, including the social and economic factors that encourage radicalisation and motivate extremist behaviour, as a contribution to a comprehensive approach to counter-terrorism' (Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 2007, p. 7). Some states, such as Victoria, undertook early initiatives to incorporate CVE into their state programmes around terrorism in light of developments at the federal level.

CVE policy in Australia and elsewhere has been routinely criticised over time (Aly et al. 2015; Cherney & Murphy 2016) for conflating the issue of social cohesion and terrorism, thus stigmatising Muslim communities and threatening their sense of belonging and cultural security within the national fabric. Nevertheless, CVE continues to be recognised as a critical means of avoiding the overall securitisation of how nations engage with the prevention of terrorism and violent extremism (Zammit 2015; Grossman 2018).

Australia has focused strongly in particular on promoting resilience to violent extremism as part of a broader effort to create more generally resilient communities that can successfully manage a range of 21st century social-ecological dynamics, challenges and transformations (Grossman et al. 2016). For example, the 2010 Counter-Terrorism White Paper (Australian Government 2010) outlined 'resilience' as one of the key pillars of the country's counter-terrorism strategy and gave an overview of the radicalisation process undergone by individuals before taking part in terrorist acts, as well as discussing the importance of family and community in countering violent extremism. Reflecting a growing international concern in Western states with attacks by 'home-grown' terrorists, the strategy sought to reduce this phenomenon by 'strengthening Australia's resilience to radicalisation and assisting individuals to disengage from violent extremist influences and beliefs' (www.livingsafetogether.gov.au). The White Paper stated that it would counter violent extremism by:

- Building on Australia's history of inclusion, multiculturalism and respect for cultural diversity to maintain a society that is resilient to the hate-based and divisive narratives that fuel terrorism [and]

- Working with the Australian community through a cooperative national approach to lessen the appeal of violent extremism and support alternative pathways for those at risk, and working internationally to support this (Australian Government 2010, p. 65).

The Countering Violent Extremism Sub-Committee (CVESC) was established under the NTCTC (now the ANZCTC) to co-ordinate CVE efforts across the country after the release of the 2010 Counter-Terrorism White Paper. As Harris-Hogan et al. (2016, p. 15) observe, 'The sub-committee is responsible for designing and administering specialised CVE programs around the country and its membership is comprised of representatives from all State and Federal policing and First Ministers' offices, multicultural affairs agencies, as well as other relevant national security agencies under the direction of two co-chairs'. The CVE Sub-Committee was provided with \$9.7 million over four years in the 2010–11 budget for 'targeted programs to reduce violent extremism in Australia' (Barker 2015, p. 1).

Australia's first national CVE framework was published in 2011 (Council of Australian Governments 2015, p. 30; Cartwright 2016), and aimed to create a national approach to CVE 'that minimises duplication and appropriately focuses resources on areas of greatest need' to be 'facilitated through the CVE Sub-Committee' in order to address 'factors that make people vulnerable to extremist influences and recruitment by terrorists'. The framework emphasised the importance of intervening early, 'before a law enforcement response might be needed' (Commonwealth of Australia 2015, p. 30). The national CVE framework sought to build resilience to extremism by taking proactive measures to promote inclusion and by mobilising communities against extremism. This strengthened focus on resilience superseded older terrorism plans such the 2007 National Action Plan, which made only a single passing reference to resilience in its conception of counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism (p. 10).

In 2014, the Government launched an updated CVE policy framework which, while maintaining its central focus on resilience, shifted its focus from broad-brush community prevention to more targeted identification and intervention with persons deemed to be at risk of radicalisation, including 'a more direct approach to identifying and providing support to individuals at risk of radicalisation' (Commonwealth of Australia 2015, p. 9). The public health prevention-inspired effort to supplement a strong focus on primary prevention of violent extremism with more targeted resources for secondary interventions for those already on pathways toward radicalised violence aligns with the critique that between 2010-2014, 'Australian CVE efforts ... overwhelmingly focused on broadly targeted prevention programs that ... has meant that Australian CVE efforts have likely failed to reach those most in need of assistance' (Harris-Hogan et al. 2016), a general critique of CVE approaches also advanced by John Berger (2016).

Included in the efforts to build resilience to violent extremism and engage civil society have been a number of research and practical resources and program initiatives supported by Commonwealth or State-based funding designed to strengthen the ways in

which resilience is integrated as part of an Australian CVE model. These include supporting initiatives such as the Australian Multicultural Foundation's *Community Awareness Training Manual: Building Resilience in the Community* and accompanying e-modules, and the *Building Resilience to Violent Extremism (BRAVE)* validated measure for assessing and strengthening youth resilience to violent extremism, developed by Australian and Canadian researchers (Grossman et al. 2020). Other state-funded initiatives that partner with community organisations and groups focused on building resilience to violent extremism are detailed in the next section.

Community-government relations in countering violent extremism

A 2015 government review of Australia's counter-terrorism policy and program architecture highlighted the importance of community involvement for future initiatives, including the developing challenge of returnees from conflict zones. The review noted that 'community members and families will be most likely to notice indications that someone may be radicalising to violent extremism and to reach out to them'. It also focused specifically on the need for 'community-based, non-government and local government organisations [that] will be important service providers, delivering intervention services to individuals (Commonwealth of Australia 2015, p.32).

The review envisaged more systematic support for the families of individuals who had already radicalised or were in the process of radicalisation, in line with an approach that attempted, wherever possible, to prevent individuals joining foreign conflicts and, where they did go and then return, to reintegrate them in order to undermine the possibility that marginalisation would lead them to plan terrorist attacks in Australia. However, the actual experience of Australian families with young people who did travel overseas to participate in Islamic State-led conflict was considerably more uneven than the policy framework envisaged, and led to calls for improved engagement, understanding and processes (Gerrand and Grossman 2018).

The framework also included consideration of expanding 'its existing community awareness training initiatives to deliver more specific capacity-building programs to family and friends of at risk individuals as well as to community leaders so that they are able to challenge and counsel at risk individuals' (Commonwealth of Australia 2015, p. 32) and noted the significance of community organisations from the education, faith, mental health, corrections, youth and sports sectors in efforts to counter violent extremism (Commonwealth of Australia 2015, p. 32).

The review underlined the importance of including communities as equal partners in future CVE initiatives, concluding that 'a new CVE strategy must do more to build and use the capacity of these partners to enable them to share the responsibility of diverting individuals from radicalisation' (Commonwealth of Australia 2015, p. 33). Yet the role of communities and civil societies in Australian CVE initiatives has proceeded with mixed responses and impacts.

On the one hand, significant training efforts promoting social health models of CVE intervention have been undertaken through CVE intervention support programs such as

RADAR, which offers training to Australian ‘government officials and frontline service providers to counter the effects of violent extremism and to assist individuals to disengage from violent extremist networks’, and organisations such as the Australian Association of Social Workers’ 2018 professional development programs on building resilience and preventing radicalisation to violent extremism.

However, a series of studies by different research teams in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland in 2016 found that while some service providers were willing to engage in professional practices that could help people who were radicalising to violent extremism, others were reluctant to do so for reputational reasons or because they feared a reduction in client willingness to engage with services and other adverse community responses. In addition, significant gaps in capability and expertise were cited as barriers to fully engaging frontline service providers (Cherney et al. 2018).

A wide range of community groups and organisations are periodically or regularly engaged in or consulted about various CVE programs by Commonwealth and State or Territory governments. The Islamic Council of Victoria for a number of years delivered the Community Integration Support (CISP) program, designed to help reintegrate people in the community following their release from prison on terrorism offences; this role has more recently been assumed by the Victorian Board of Imams. A cognate post-prison reintegration support program, the Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM), is run through Corrections New South Wales with religious and civil society support. However, particularly in the case of women’s involvement in Australian CVE initiatives, and despite the international evidence on the importance of gender inclusiveness in designing and delivering CVE initiatives (Grossman et al. 2018) there remain barriers for a range of reasons to public acknowledgement of the role of women in fostering and driving CVE activities and programs at community level, despite the local activism and private involvement of many women in different parts of Australia who work towards these goals (Grossman et al. 2018, pp. 78-90).

Some civil society organisations offer CVE-based programs designed specifically for community education, awareness and support purposes. These include the Australian Multicultural Foundation’s Community Awareness Training Manual, mentioned above; the Victorian Arabic Social Service’s education and awareness program for the families of young people who may be radicalising to violence, and All Together Now, which since 2012 has led the CAPE (Community Action for Preventing Extremism) program, formerly known as Exit White Power, focused on helping people disengage from white supremacist and ethno-nationalist ideologies and movements.

Several state government programs also work directly at the community interface, including the previously mentioned Multicultural New South Wales’s COMPACT program, which partners with community groups to provide pro-social youth and other engagement programs that focus strongly on resilience-building, social cohesion and safeguarding. The online magazine *The Point*, funded by the same state government body, provides digital publication opportunities to young people focused on ‘local and

international politics, religion, society and culture...and the impact of overseas conflicts on local communities’.

In 2015, the Victorian state government developed a *Strategic Framework to Strengthen Victoria's Social Cohesion and the Resilience of its Communities* through a ministerial taskforce focused on social cohesion, community resilience and preventing violent extremism that supported, amongst other program outcomes, a four-year virtual research institute, the Research Institute on Social Cohesion (RIOSC). This formed part of a broader suite of funded programs in this area totalling \$25 million from 2015-2018, with significant involvement from community and civil society organisations in program development and participation. Following the conclusion of this program, the Victorian Government provided \$3.2 million in funding to establish the independent Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS), a consortium of eight university, community and industry partners to advance and build on the work of the foundation RIOSC program, including two research and program streams that focus directly on issues related to violent extremism.

Muslim community leaders and countering violent extremism

As noted above, religiously inspired or attributed violent radicalisation in Australia has for two decades been strongly associated with Islamist ideologies and movements. This has meant that a disproportionate burden has fallen on Australian Islamic peak bodies and representative organisations to repudiate terrorism and publicly condemn the abuse of Islamic beliefs and principles each time an Islamist-inspired or attributed attack occurs or plot is disrupted. Australian Muslim religious leaders have been both consistent and forthright in publicly and privately condemning terrorist attacks and contesting the theological rationales advanced by Islamist groups that justify violent radicalisation.

They have also sought to heal relations and suspicions between Muslims and non-Muslims through a range of public-facing cross-cultural activities such as mosque open-days, which developed enormous resonance in Melbourne on 17 March 2019, when mosques participating in that city's annual mosque open-day program were flooded by non-Muslim Australian well-wishers expressing their sorrow and solidarity following the Christchurch mosque attacks in New Zealand only two days before on 15 March.

However, in the post-9/11 period and continuing into the present, Muslim community leaders have been solicited at ‘unprecedented levels’ by media for commentary on a range of matters relating to terrorism both at home and abroad (Roude 2017). For those who run religion-based community groups and organisations that are often only modestly funded and supported by significant amounts of unpaid voluntarism, having to deal both with Muslim community concerns about the impacts of terrorism on community wellbeing and also the persistent enquiries and importunate demands that they speak out and ‘say more...and mean it’ against violent extremism (Medhora 2015) has produced anxiety, fatigue and despair for many religious and civil society leaders (Roude, 2017). As Roude (2017) notes,

The continued scrutiny regarding the perceived violent teachings of Islam, and the

capacity of Muslims to integrate into Australian culture or share the same values as other Australians, challenged the very identity of Muslims. Many felt they had to choose between being either Australian or Muslim, rather than being allowed to possess multiple identities, just as the majority of Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds and other faiths have successfully been able to do throughout the nation's history (pp. 274-275).

The evidence of feeling that they must 'choose between' being either Australian *or* Muslim rather than living 'multiple identities' as other Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds have been able to do signals the abiding strain under which Australian Muslim civil society leaders have been operating in relation to CVE, and the impost this creates on their ability to contribute meaningfully, on their own terms, to the challenges created by violent radicalisation right across the spectrum from Islamist to anti-Islam violence.

This has not stopped a number of Australian civil society organisations with religious and/or social welfare mandates from working tirelessly to contribute to government-partnered or community-led or based countering violent extremism programs and outreach, or of the general resilience and sense of community and national belonging shown by Australian Muslims despite these issues (Dunn et al. 2015). However, there are a number of challenges they continue to face. These include: lack of adequate funding and resources; community reluctance by some organisations to accept government funding or partnership opportunities because of concerns they will be, or be seen as, participating in the securitisation of Australian Muslim communities; lack of culturally appropriate service providers in health, mental health and violence prevention who can combine professional expertise with relevant cultural frameworks for treatment and intervention, and reluctance on the part of governments to allow community organisations to control and lead on CVE programming and design.

In summarising some of the challenges faced by contemporary community efforts to respond to the challenges of violent radicalisation, Grossman (2018) noted that one area relates to how families and community members interpret so-called 'early warning signs' of radicalisation to violence, including changes in religious identity or performativity amongst young people. She draws attention to the ways in which 'many of the behaviours that are seen as indicative of rejecting pro-social values can be misconstrued or actually read as *conforming to* rather than rejecting those values ... because the 'early warning signs' of radicalisation are (like the symptoms of some medical conditions) frustratingly vague and diffuse'. Some Australian CVE programs, such as the Australian Multicultural Foundation's Community Awareness Training resource, acknowledge this problem, taking a broader approach in its e-module and 'cyber-parent' apps by noting that many of these early warning signs can also connote other kinds of adjustment, developmental or social difficulties across a broad spectrum of challenges leading to anti-social or maladaptive behaviours for young people.

In addition,

many of the agencies and community groups that constitute strong entry-points for civil society activism on countering violent extremism – including networks focused on youth work, social work, community development, health and wellbeing and community education – are fearful of either being stigmatised or of losing existing clients and funding support if they are overtly identified as providing intervention and support services. ... Eliminating the stigma of CVE activities means tackling complex and difficult issues around uncertain or compromised trust flows, the integrity and viability of government-community partnerships to address violent extremism (Ellis and Abdi 2017) and the capacity to conduct safe, open and meaningful dialogue around the issues and how they can be addressed. These remain ongoing challenges. (Grossman 2018, p. 165)

The solution to this is to ensure that efforts to engage civil society actors in responding to and intervening in violent radicalisation must be grounded in empirically based evidence *from families and civil society participants* themselves. These efforts must take sufficient account of the stigma, sense of uneasiness or discomfort, anxiety and lack of confidence that some civil society actors experience when thinking about how they might become involved in helping prevent or counter violent extremism. The Australian experience also suggests that there is a need to work on overcoming the social stigmas attached to confronting radicalisation to violence at community level. There remains little prospect of doing so without creative solutions for making spaces in which meaningful and *open* dialogue on the risks and impacts of violent extremism can occur.

Finally, there is little engagement of civil society at present at the disengagement and desistance end of the violent extremism spectrum. Involving civil society has been conceptualised in Australia, as internationally, almost entirely in terms of prevention and early intervention. By contrast, disengagement and desistance is dominated by law enforcement and clinical practitioners, at least in Australia, although in other countries, such as Singapore, there is far greater emphasis on mobilising community-based resources, including religious resources, to facilitate successful reintegration of former extremists. To date, this has meant that former violent extremists are largely denied the very forms of support and social engagement that could help re-build their sense of social connection, and that families and communities in turn have been left without the resources to understand, cope with, support and defend reintegration processes either for those exiting prisons or for those who may, despite current restrictions, return from overseas conflict zones.

Crisis case study: The Anzac Day Plot, 2015

As noted above, religiously inspired or attributed terrorism in Australia has been concentrated primarily on concerns, plots and attacks related to Islamist violent extremism. The period from 2001-2013, including major plot disruptions linked to Al-Qa'eda or other Islamist movements, has already been discussed above. However, the advent of Islamic State in early 2014 created new challenges and momentum for Islamist-

related violence in relation to both foreign fighter mobilisation and also introduced a change in the number, scale and methods of domestic plots for attacks within Australia. A further shift was the drop in age range of violent extremist actors, with more adolescent males (and some females) at younger ages becoming involved in terrorist planning and execution than previously.

The two-year period between 2015-2016 saw an increased level of activity arising from the successful reach of Islamic State narrative, propaganda and recruitment into Australia, enabled by digital communications but also localised within domestic social and political networks. In the discussion that follows, we analyse, drawing on media reports and publicly available court documents, the 'Anzac Day' plot in 2015, one of Australia's most serious disrupted terrorist plots. This case study helps us to examine in greater depth some of the issues around religiously inspired or attributed radicalisation in Australia that we have canvassed above.

Anzac Day terror plot, 2015

Anzac Day on 25 April marks the anniversary of the landing of New Zealand and Australian troops, popularly known as Anzacs (the acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) on the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey in 1915 during the First World War. While the campaign ended in military defeat for the Anzacs, it is widely claimed that the Gallipoli experience helped foster a sense of nationhood in both New Zealand and Australia. It has since broadened out to serve as a day of commemoration for all those Australians and others who have died in wars throughout history.

The event is commemorated each year at Gallipoli (as well as in Australia and a number of other countries) through Turkish, Australian and New Zealand cooperation. Anzac Day and associated ceremonies have not always been uncontroversial, but they remain a key element of national history and identity-making for broad sections of Australian society, undergoing a revival in the 1990s that persists into the present. The Australian Turkish Embassy's website contains a [quote from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk](#) that refers to the fallen ANZAC soldiers as 'heroes...lying in the soil of a friendly country. ... There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehments to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours. ... Having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well'.

In the lead-up to Anzac Day 2015, Sevdet Besim, then an 18-year-old Australian Islamic State (IS) supporter, prepared with a small number of associates to attack and kill police officers on Anzac Day to 'make sure the dogs remember this as well as [their] fallen heroes' (*R v Besim* [2016] VSC 537). The attack was prevented when Besim and others alleged to be involved were raided by the police on 18 April 2015 as part of 'Operation Rising' conducted by the Victorian Joint Counter-Terrorism Team (JCTT), comprising both federal and state police amongst other agencies (Zammit 2017). While several arrests were made in connection with the Anzac Day plot, the Besim case, which resulted in a trial and conviction, serves as an especially useful illustration of some of the factors related to religion and violent radicalisation, and accordingly we focus here specifically on Besim's trajectory to violent radicalisation.

Besim pleaded guilty in June 2016 to committing acts in preparation for or planning a terrorist attack and was sentenced on 5 September 2016 to 10 years' imprisonment with a non-parole period of 7 years and 6 months. The charges to which he pled comprised planning a vehicle-borne attack to first kill, then behead, a law enforcement officer on Anzac Day, an offence which carried a potential sentence of life in prison. Four other suspects were also arrested on 18 April, but 'none were proven to be involved' (Zammit 2017, p. 47). Following Besim's original sentencing, an appeal was mounted by the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions against the adequacy of the sentence, and a judgement delivered on 23 June 2017 upheld the appeal and increased Besim's sentence to 14 years imprisonment with a non-parole period of 10 years and 6 months.

Besim was motivated to act in part by a fatwa issued on 22 September 2014 by Abu Bakr Baghdadi, then leader of Islamic State, directing followers to target disbelievers in order to advance IS's violent radical ideology. The fatwa was widely reported in Australia and made specific mention of targeting soldiers, police and members of the intelligence services in Western countries, including Australia. The day after the fatwa was issued, Besim's friend, 18-year-old Numan Haider, attempted to stab two JCCWT police officers at the Endeavour Hills Police Station in outer Melbourne. Haider had previously been assessed as radicalised by authorities through social media posts and accounts showing that he had accessed a range of Islamic State recruitment propaganda, including executions and beheadings, instructions on how to maim and kill, and posing with Islamic State flags in combat gear. During this attack, Haider was shot and killed by police. Police investigations revealed Besim was with Haider in the hours leading up to his death, and Numan Haider's death became a catalyst for the terrorist attack planned by Besim (*R v Besim* [2016] VSC 537, p .5).

Sevdet Besim's background

Besim was eighteen years old when the plot was foiled. Besim's parents were Albanians who married in Macedonia and then came to Australia and had four male children, of which Sevdet Besim was the third. He and his family led an unremarkable life, settling in Melbourne, attending schools, socialising with people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and finding employment. Indeed, the sentencing judge commented:

One of the striking, yet disturbing, things about Besim is that, for most of his life, he had a perfectly ordinary existence and showed no signs of the distorted thoughts that drove him to commit this offence. It was only once he became exposed, in his late-teens, to extremist, hate-filled thinking from older, hateful but charismatic individuals that his plans and actions took a decidedly sinister turn' (*R v Besim* [2016] VSC 537, p. 2).

While Besim grew up in a Hanafi Muslim household, religion was not a major part of his life until about three years prior to his arrest; the family reportedly observed Ramadan and Eid and attended a local mosque but did not require their children's participation or attendance. During Besim's final years of high school, however, his father became more involved with religion. He reportedly started abstaining from drinking alcohol and began

attending the mosque regularly on Friday, although his mother did not follow suit. The family's Albanian culture and community was also an important reference point for Besim's upbringing, including his community's emphasis on the importance of family and on the teaching and practice of good values. It is unclear whether the experiences of the family prior to resettling in Australia involved any exposure that could have created trauma or long-term stress as the result of having to endure civil or other conflict.

Until Year 9 in school, Besim was not deeply involved in religious life. While he observed some Islamic practices, he did not fast or regularly attend the mosque. From 2011, however, Besim became more interested in his religion. While he had friends from diverse cultural groups, he was particularly friendly with some students who were devout and who often would talk about the Koran. Through his association with those students, he began to learn more about Islam. He started reading the Koran and attending a local mosque. He began praying five times a day and his mosque attendance increased significantly when he was not at school (*R v Besim* [2016] VSC 537, p. 4).

Exposure to extremist views and radicalisation

However, it was not until Besim's involvement with a Melbourne Islamic centre later identified as a hotspot for recruiting violent radicalised extremists (Baxendale 2015; Houston and Wroe 2014) that his exposure to violent extremist ideology really took off. At the centre of Besim's transition into violent ideology lies the Al-Furqan Islamic Centre in Melbourne's southeast suburb of Springvale, which closed in 2015 shortly after his arrest. Besim was introduced to Al-Furqan in 2012, but his attendance there increased in 2013-14 as he neared the end of high school. Unlike the family's regular mosque, where the lectures were purely religious, the lectures at Al-Furqan were also political in their nature and, among other things, focused the conflict in the Middle East and the fate of Muslims in that part of the world, attracting surveillance by intelligence authorities (Baxendale 2015). The Centre was known for its strict interpretation of Islam. Its leader at the time, Albanian-Australian Harun Mehicevic, has been described as a charismatic figure who, like Nacer Abdul Benbrika of Operation Pendennis, broke away from a more mainstream mosque to set up his own alternative centre of Islamic religious interpretation and outreach. Through Al-Furqan, Besim met Neil Prakash, who went on to become a senior figure in the Islamic State and served as a senior recruiter of Australian terrorists; a number of other people who went on to become foreign fighters or key influencers for Islamic State also attended Al-Furqan at various points (Baxendale 2015). The court remarked during sentencing that Besim 'was quite influenced by the religion, ideology and politics that were being espoused at the Centre' (*R v Besim* [2016] VSC 537, p. 4), becoming radicalised to the point where he fervently believed that violent jihad – both in Australia and elsewhere – was justifiable. He became increasingly admiring of individuals from groups such as Islamic State and Al-Qa'eda, whom he felt 'spoke out boldly for Muslims', as opposed to mainstream Islamic leaders, who, in his view, achieved little for change or justice. This combined with the more immediate catalyst for the Anzac Day plot: the fatal police shooting of Besim's close friend and fellow adolescent Numan Haider in September 2014 (*R v Besim* [2016] VSC 537, p. 4).

Numan Haider had also come to the attention of counter-terrorism authorities. On 16 September 2014, Haider learned that ASIO had turned down his passport application because they suspected that he planned to join IS. During the next week, he 'publicly expressed outrage' at the passport refusal (Zammit 2017, p. 49) and at the widely publicised Operation Appleby counter-terrorism raids in Sydney and Brisbane on 18 September 2014, two days after his passport application was denied. Three days later on 22 September 2014, after IS spokesman al-Adnani issued a call for violence against citizens of the US-led coalition, 'Haider downloaded the call to arms and arranged to meet two Victorian Joint Counter-Terrorism Taskforce police officers in a carpark' (Zammit 2017, p. 49). The two officers arrived believing that they would discuss his previous passport application, but 'Haider brought two knives and a *shahada* (profession of faith) flag and attacked the police officers' (Zammit 2017, p. 49). He stabbed both officers before being shot dead by one of the officers under attack.

Recruitment and preparation

According to evidence presented in Besim's sentencing hearings (*R v Besim* [2016] VSC 537), Prakash contacted Besim through social media shortly after Haider's death in September 2014 and encouraged him to try to come to Syria. Besim applied for a passport on 13 November 2014. On 9 December 2014, however, he was informed by letter that his passport might not be issued. It was against this background that Besim made the decision to plan a terrorist act in Melbourne (*R v Besim* [2016] VSC 537, p. 3).

Between 22 and 25 January 2015, Besim conducted a number of internet searches associated with Islamic State (IS). These included searches for publications issued by IS, including the Islamic State Report and *Dabiq*, a propaganda and recruitment on-line magazine that glorified IS and contained pictures of IS executions and speeches by leaders of IS urging Muslims to strike at citizens of countries participating in the US-led coalition. Subsequent police analysis of Besim's mobile telephone revealed that, on 28 January 2015, he had created an electronic memorandum on his phone which amounted to a *bay'ah* or pledge of allegiance to the leader of IS. In a subsequent conversation recorded in March, he confirmed that he had given his *bay'ah* to the head of IS about two months earlier. On 2 February 2015, Besim commenced making internet searches on the Anzac Day commemoration to be held in Melbourne that year. Those searches included references to the Dawn Service, the Shrine of Remembrance and Camp Gallipoli (*R v Besim* [2016] VSC 537, p. 5).

Communications with British IS supporter

A significant feature in Besim's recruitment to preparations for a domestic terror attack was his online relationship with 'S', a 14-year-old English boy masquerading as an adult jihadist who claimed he had a wife and son. Besim was first introduced to 'S' through Neil Prakash. Over a nine-day period beginning 17 March 2015, Besim was in repeated communication via the encrypted messaging application Telegram with 'S'. While Besim was led to believe he was communicating with an adult man, in fact, 'S' was a radicalised 14-year-old British boy who has since been sentenced to detention for life with a minimum of 5 years for his part in inciting this act of terrorism. "S" was a teenager in

London who had been increasingly influenced by IS during 2014. Zammit writes that 'According to evidence later presented in the UK sentencing hearings for 'S', Prakash had mentored 'S', communicating daily for a period, and brought him into IS's online community' (Zammit 2017, p. 50).

Early in 2015, Prakash reportedly told 'S' of a 'brother in Australia who wished to carry out a terrorist attack but needed a guide or mentor' (Miller cited in Zammit 2017, p. 50). Shortly after this, Besim contacted 'S' through Telegram and said 'he was the *mujahid* from Australia' (Zammit 2017, p. 50). Parts of their conversations disclosed during the sentencing hearing reveal that a key focus for Besim was his hatred of authority and institutions, including the police and intelligence agencies. Besim said during these conversations that he would 'love to take out some cops [or] [i]ntelligence agents' and that he was going to 'meet with them [and] then take some heads'. When asked for a list of those he hated the most in order to target them, Besim replied the AFP, ASIO and police, and later said that he would 'run the dogs over'. He revealed that initially he had had the idea of storming the Australian Federal Police headquarters in Melbourne (*R v Besim* [2016] VSC 537, p. 6).

Besim acknowledged in his online communications his intent to prepare and plan a terrorist attack on Anzac Day in Melbourne. These exchanges also revealed Besim's desire to fight for Islamic State overseas and his frustration at not being able to secure travel documents which would enable him to leave Australia. During one exchange with 'S', Besim discussed martyrdom and confirmed that he was prepared to die in the course of carrying out the terrorist attack in Melbourne. As communications continued, targets, timing and locations were discussed, along with the various methods and weapons that could be used, including acquiring a gun or machete. Besim also wrote a note on his mobile phone detailing his reasons for the attack, his expectation that he would die in the course of it, and instructions for his burial. The court observed in relation to 'S' that the fact that a fourteen-year-old played this role was unusual, but that in various respects their interaction resembled 'other virtually planned plots in four key areas: targets, tactics, commitment, and publicity' (Zammit 2017, p. 51).

'S' was simultaneously being monitored by police in England and this led to the discovery of his online conversations with Besim. Australian police were informed and Besim was arrested before his plan could be executed.

Discussion

Analysis of the role of religion in drivers to violent radicalisation

A number of features in the Anzac Day plot relate to the broader issues raised in the Australian context of radicalisation to violence, and they bear similarities to other cases of violent radicalisation that have been inspired by or attributed to religious sentiments or frameworks. In relation to Besim, the factors relevant to his radicalisation to violence break down as follows:

- Personal grievances
- Social networks
- Ideological influences
- Facilitation and support for tactical attack planning
- Legal, political and media environment

In relation to *personal grievances*, the discontents that led to Sevdet Besim's primary role in this plot tended to target three key areas: grievances related to the perceived persecution by the West of Muslims both abroad and in Australia; grievances related to the behaviour of law enforcement and security agencies concerning his passport denial, police raids on Australian Muslims and the death of Numan Haider, and grievances related to the perceived illegitimacy of the Australian state. These grievances fuse the religious and the political, but in many respects, they appear more aligned to the political elements and to hatred for Australian authorities in both a concrete and symbolic sense, rather than springing from any deep religious sentiment. However, the plans of Besim for martyrdom and his pledge of faith to Islamic State are also clearly locatable within the frameworks promoted by religiously grounded Islamist movements, as was his personal shift toward greater observance of his Islamic faith.

It is critically important to note here that, while Besim became more religiously observant in late adolescence, this is not of itself synonymous in any way with radicalisation to violence. Millions of people move into and also out of relationships with religious identities and devotional practices across many different faiths in ways and for reasons that have zero to do with either violent or non-violent radicalisation. Instead, it is the ideological direction in which such increased levels of religious identity are channelled through the influence of social and political networks grounded in religious bonding and interpretation that helps determine whether violent radicalisation will become a possibility. In this sense, Besim's movement from the mainstream Hanafi doctrine in which he was raised to the heterodox extremist doctrine of Islamic State can be described as a theological-ideological rather than purely theological shift.

In relation to *social networks*, Besim's gravitation toward the Al-Furqan Islamic Centre was critical. This connection fostered a new peer group whose bonds were indistinguishable from the fused interpretation of religion and politics that made this social network thrive. In addition, these networks included not only peers, but also older mentors and charismatic figures who fused religion and politics in ways that created the sense of purpose and sense of belonging that is characteristic of social and political movements seeking to create lasting change in their environments. These social networks were not merely embodied, but also existed online, as we can see in Besim's tactical recruitment phase during his relationship with 'S' and with Neil Prakash, creating a widened scope for social influence and manipulation that reinforced rather than challenged Besim's trajectory toward violence.

Ideological influence through the Al-Furqan Islamic Centre, in which young men were steadily influenced and recruited towards violent extremist ideology by charismatic

figures, such as Prakash and Mehicevic, is also central to Besim's development toward violent radicalisation. This broader ideological influence – what we might call an ideologically influential milieu – was intensified by the personal relationships Besim developed with figures such as Prakash, but also with peers including Numan Haider, who was himself already radicalised by the time he attacked police in Endeavour Hills. The personalised ideological reinforcement offered by the 14-year-old 'S' online during the tactical planning phase also helped strengthen Besim's resolve and sense of purpose, along with concrete facilitation and advice that helped advance and transform Besim's plans from fantasy into reality.

Finally, there was the broader *legal, political and media environment* active at the time Besim developed and pursued his attack plans for Anzac Day in 2015. These events occurred against the backdrop of heightened police attention and raids on suspected terrorist individuals and groups at a time when, in 2014, the terrorism threat level was raised for the first time since 2002 in Australia from 'possible' to 'probable', and when the political and media rhetoric around Islam and terrorism had become more inflammatory. Both these developments were swiftly exploited by violent radical influencers as features that heightened a sense that Muslims as a group were being targeted by authorities; these influencers sought to use such events to delegitimise the Australian state and to further legitimise the justification for a violent response in defence of the *ummah*.

They also occurred at a time when Islamic State's success in propaganda and influence was peaking globally amidst a worldwide upsurge in foreign fighter recruitment and travel. This lends additional resonance to the choice of the Anzac Day commemorations as the plot's target, since the day bears symbolic significance for its remembrance of a significant military defeat of Australian and New Zealand troops during the First World War, but also as a historical event that involved a military incursion into the traditionally Muslim territory of Gallipoli.

In sum, one could say that Besim's trajectory toward radicalisation to violence was instigated by the influence of social networks in which 'political Islam' featured heavily, which then combined with more personal trigger events (the passport refusal, the death of Numan Haider) and was further enabled by practical facilitation of his plans through Islamic State recruiter Neil Prakash's online introduction of Besim to 'S', and spurred by the heightened environment of tension, anxiety and uncertainty in Australia as it responded to the risks created by the rise of Islamic State's unprecedented global reach and influence. Personal losses, frustrations and yearnings were increasingly framed, supported and channelled by a politicised religious framework in which religious identity, social bonding and political goals both *against* the Australian state and *for* the creation of a new state (the caliphate) were effectively fused.

The response of the state and civil society

One critical element in the Anzac Day plot story is the fact that Australian police were alerted to the advanced nature of the attack planning by their British counterparts, who had been monitoring the English 14-year-old 'S's' online activity for some time. Besim's

attack could arguably have slipped through the net had it not been for intelligence-sharing between Australia and the UK on this occasion. Australian police's decision to move quickly to arrest Besim and other alleged actors as part of the Anzac Day plot reflected a broader turn in law enforcement responses to terrorism plots, which emphasised earlier intervention than previously to prevent fatalities or casualties in light of the significantly shortened lead times for tactical attack planning and execution that had begun to prevail. At the same time, this created less security for the likelihood of charges and convictions that could be sustained, although in the Besim case there was enough evidence to result in a successful conviction.

Besim's unremarkable upbringing, his exposure to a broad range of people from other ethnicities and backgrounds in multicultural Melbourne, and his stable family life in a religiously anchored but by no means ideologically focused household do not provide either context or any particular explanatory power for his radicalisation to violence. Nor does his increasing interest in religious observance, in and of itself. More salient are his young age (late adolescence), his social networks, and the ideological influences he was exposed to through his gravitation toward a well-known centre of Islamist interpretation, rhetoric and legitimisation of violence. In addition, there were the psychological stressors Besim experienced in relation to the death of his friend and the denial of his passport application, both of which fuelled his grievances and sense of personal loss in different ways.

What could the state have done? Its options in relation to social networks are effectively nil. Friendships are not crimes, and Australia has robust freedom of association laws. The role of the state is also limited in relation to pursuing movements and groups that are merely extremist, rather than violent extremist, given the balance in Australia between preserving civil liberties and human rights on one hand and managing risks and threats to national security on the other. The Al Furqan Islamic Centre had broken no laws, and its closure shortly after Besim and others were charged in the Anzac Day plot was voluntary, rather than compelled by law or state intervention. Moreover, opportunities to monitor online communications were and remain restricted by various privacy and other laws and must meet a fairly high threshold for such monitoring to occur.

But there were other early intervention points that, in hindsight, could have acted as moments in which civil society levers and mechanisms, rather than the powers of the state, could potentially have been brought to bear. In the aftermath of the arrests of Besim and his associates, the police were careful to assert that 'the individuals' arrested 'were acting by themselves and are not representative of any religious, cultural or national group'. The Deputy Commissioner of Victoria Police said, 'I think the entire Australian community should be concerned about the young age of these men; this issue is not just for law enforcement agencies, but the broader community. We need intervention strategies to make sure they [young adults] don't go down this path'.

One intervention point was clearly around the death of Besim's friend Numan Haider, also 18 years old. Court documents suggest that Besim's attendance at school suffered after

Haider died. It is not clear from publicly available documents whether or not the school sought to maintain a connection with Besim, offered him counselling through the school, or facilitated other forms of local community-based support to help him deal with this death and its meaning for him. And local Islamic community leaders also questioned whether they had done enough in the aftermath of Numan Haider's death: 'In all honesty, I think we didn't do enough with this cohort after the Endeavour Hills incident, we didn't do enough to engage the people around that young man [Numan Haider] and make sure that they were ok and they weren't going through some difficulties'.

Another civil society intervention point was the Al Furqan Islamic Centre itself. The centre and its leader were known for their controversial extremist views and ideological orientation. Yet following the arrests of Besim and his associates, the secretary of the Islamic Council of Victoria, which represents many of the civil society and religious organisations of Melbourne's Muslim communities, said: 'I think as a community, we've probably failed in this respect historically, we've tended to marginalise and push people like this away. Whereas clearly our focus now is to try to bring them into what we're doing ... everybody needs a role model, and I think we've failed in that regard with some of these people ourselves', noting that a challenge for the Islamic community was to 'connect with isolated young men...to make sure they're not sitting behind closed doors somewhere...and provide support for those people who really need support'. There were also opportunities for those in Haider's local environment to help reframe the denial of his passport as a safeguarding measure designed to keep him alive, rather than as a wilful tool of oppression and persecution by the state.

Finally, there were intervention points, albeit with a high degree of difficulty and challenge, in relation to the political and media rhetoric circulating in the lead-up to the Anzac Day plot. The prime minister at the time, Tony Abbott, was consistently accused of inflaming tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims through his public statements, effectively 'presid[ing] over a breakdown in the relationship between many Muslims and their government'. While not new, the tone of the 'national conversation' on the part of government towards Australian Muslims had become increasingly bleak and accusatory following the rise of Islamic State, and this created a heightened sense of vulnerability and siege for Muslims that easily lent itself to exploitation by violent extremist influencers. Greater awareness of the impact of this on young people like Sevdet Besim, and on the agility with which such statements could be used to foster enhanced suspicion and hostility towards the state, could have resulted in interventions in which the state reassessed its own role in fostering a climate of division and despair around Muslim belonging in Australia as a national polity.

Best practices and conclusions

Religiously inspired or attributed violent extremism in Australia, despite its low numbers of incidents and actors relative to other countries and regions around the world, has nevertheless created a series of challenges and risks for Australian communities.

Religious belief or faith alone, even when heterodox or extremist in orientation (Hellyer and Grossman 2019) has not proved to have significant explanatory power for why a small proportion of Australian men and women have radicalised to violence, or why they might do so in future. More salient are understandings of the fusion between ideology, religious frameworks and the legitimisation of violence in particular contexts; the vulnerability of youth in particular to radicalisation through peer influence and charismatic leadership; the gendered experience of sense of identity, belonging, power and efficacy; the role of civil society in creating levers for early intervention through education, community support networks and religious mentorship and role modelling; and the role of the state in resourcing not only law enforcement and security operations as part of a counter-terror response, but also a range of social and community-based programming, intervention and support as part of a countering violent extremism response.

For these last measures concerning social and community-based programming and support, it is vital that relations of trust and mutual respect between government and civil society exist. Where they do not exist or have been damaged, they must be initiated or repaired. Australia's focus on resilience as a core element of their CVE platform has been exemplary in some respects, because it highlights the ways in which resilience to violent extremism functions as a prophylactic at times when extremist ideologies and calls to violence may beckon. But in order for such platforms to take their full effect, we need to understand what 'resilience to violent extremism' looks like on a number of levels and scales.

Best practice in building resilience to violent extremism begins with building resilience in individuals and communities at basic levels – through ensuring that people and communities are able to meet their fundamental needs for housing, employment, food, health and social connection, and where they are not, to source help in doing so. It means recognising that bonding capital (the ability of people within the same cultural, ethnic, social or religious group to connect in positive ways) *and* bridging capital (the ability of people to develop meaningful and positive connections and relationships with people from different cultural, ethnic, social or religious backgrounds) *and* vertical or linking capital (the ability of people to connect meaningfully with and have a voice within the public institutions and powers that govern their lives) are all important resources for building resilience to violent extremism as one of a range of adversities and social harms that they may encounter.

It also means recognising that, even when people are able to identify and navigate their way toward resources that can help them cope and rise to adversities and challenges – including the appeal of violent extremism – that these resources are culturally meaningful for them. And it means that governments at all levels must not see resilience to violent extremism as something that can be measured or promoted only in communities; governments themselves are part of the ecology of resilience, and they too must ask how resilient they are – how open to new ways of thinking and coping, how willing to adapt and experiment, how committed and flexible to transformation when new needs and new

adversities arise, and how willing to take risks in order to build genuine trust and partnerships with civil society – as part of the resilience matrix (Grossman 2021).

Best practice recommendations

A large part of this resilience involves recognising the assets that civil society already possesses in relation to helping prevent and counter radicalisation to violence. Where religious sentiment or belief emerges as a feature of violent radicalisation pathways, there is no substitute for drawing on the knowledge and expertise of religious leaders and communities who can help re-frame religious ideas and meaning away from violent extremist narratives. But to do this, these religious leaders and communities must feel valued, respected, trusted and heard. They are not there to serve the state, but to serve their faith and the broader society in which this is practiced.

In this sense, Australia's governments at Commonwealth and State or Territory level have had both highs and lows in their efforts to partner with Muslim religious leaders and organisations to help counter the appeal and spread of violent extremism. On the positive side of the ledger, there are Australian programs that reflect genuine partnerships between religious civil society groups and government. This includes programs focused on reintegrating prisoners convicted of terrorism offences once they are released into the community; prevention programs designed to offer religious and social mentorship and guidance to young people; and intervention programs designed to help those already partway down the path to violent radicalisation to rethink their relationship to their faith and find alternative ways of creating meaningful lives and achievements that do not involve violence.

But if religion itself lacks sufficient explanatory power to help understand the drivers to violent radicalisation, then it follows that religion alone cannot be the whole answer to preventing and addressing violent radicalisation. 'Whole of society' approaches to countering violent extremism mean exactly that: engaging in multi-disciplinary and multi-agency approaches (Rosand 2018) that bring together knowledge and expertise across multiple government and civil society agencies and groups; between police, justice, social, welfare, health youth and education systems; and between local, regional and national levels.

Using the Anzac Day plot as a testbed for what kinds of best practice can be applied in preventing violent radicalisation of the kind we have been examining here, the following recommendations and examples of best practice in Australia emerge:

Early intervention is key. There is no magic bullet for identifying the early warning signs of radicalisation to violence, but early intervention is vital, especially in the pre-criminal phase, to help steer people away from violent radicalisation onto more peaceful alternatives.

The New South Wales State Government's 'Step Together' service is a best-practice example which combines a telephone helpline and webchat option to provide information, support and resources to both families and civil society workers who may encounter someone close or known to them who may be radicalising to violence. www.steptogether.com.au

Schools are central mechanisms of support and intervention for young people.

Schools have a critical role to play in supporting young people experiencing challenges and adversities. Their role in educating young people to think critically and develop a strong sense of confidence about values, identity and belonging is clear. However, as the Anzac Day plot case study has shown, education is not the only resource that schools can and should provide. Significant stressors for young people such as grief and loss can serve as triggers for the tipping point into violent action. Following up changes in school performance, behaviour or attendance and ensuring culturally appropriate counselling services are available through school services or referral systems is essential, as is engaging families where appropriate with what resources are available through schools.

The New South Wales Government has developed resources that provide CVE-specific counselling and support for students and training to teachers and allied school support staff. This includes Specialist School Support Teams that connect with the efforts of community leaders and families in responding to critical incidents as well as general CVE prevention efforts. <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/countering-violent-extremism>, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/la/papers/Pages/qanda-tracking-details.aspx?pk=240872>

Ideologically based extremism needs to be challenged openly as part of a broader approach to antisocial attitudes and behaviours, and meaningful opportunities to build resilience provided. Violent radicalisation begins with grievances, and violent extremist narratives appear to offer solutions to these grievances. Ensuring that alternatives and resources are available to help build resilience to violent extremism means recognising that grievances themselves may be legitimate, but that violence is never a solution in redressing them.

Several best-practice programs relating to this are offered in Australia. One is the Australian Multicultural Foundation's 'Community Awareness Training Manual: Building Resilience in the Community' (<https://amf.net.au/entry/community-awareness-training-manual-building-resilience-in-the-community>). Program evaluations have shown that participants feel empowered and show a greater willingness to engage in activities to counter violent extremism, including

willingness to deliver training into their local communities. The program is offered in both face to face and e-module formats.

Another best-practice example is All Together Now's CAPE (Community Action to Prevent Extremism) program (<https://alltogethernow.org.au/es/exit/>). Modelled on EXIT programs in Europe but tailored to Australian circumstances and populations, the CAPE program focuses on right-wing violent extremism. It offers counter-narratives and challenges white supremacist groups and ideologies, providing information on the destructive nature of such ideologies to friends, family and community leaders who are able to intervene in the lives of people at risk.

Youth programs and supports involving young people as co-designers and leaders are vital given the importance of peer influence. There are a range of youth-based or focused Australian programs that seek to enhance young people's participation in community and civic life by emphasising skills development, leadership capacity, knowledge and information sharing, and social cohesion across religious and cultural differences.

Two amongst many examples of community-based youth programs that have had a sustained impact are the Lebanese Muslim Association's 'Engage Connect Grow' program (www.lma.org.au/community-programs/ecg/) and Melbourne's Youth Activating Youth program (www.yay.org.au/programs).

Robustly assess resilience to violent extremism assets and vulnerabilities in local areas to inform evidence-based approaches to interventions and programming. While there is much government and program-based discourse around resilience to violent extremism, evidence-based assessments of resilience to violent extremism capacities and vulnerabilities are often missing. Some of the factors that can converge to create vulnerabilities to violent extremism, or alternatively existing community resilience assets that serve as protective factors which can be further mobilised, require in-depth local assessment to help identify and bring forward both strengths and weaknesses and help inform locally responsive, targeted interventions and programming.

A best-practice tool to support this assessment is the BRAVE measure for youth resilience to violent extremism (<https://brave.resilienceresearch.org/about/>), a standardised validated measure developed through a joint Australian/Canadian project that assesses five domains of resilience to violent extremism: cultural identity and connectedness; bridging capital; linking capital; violence-related beliefs, and violence-related behaviours. The tool is currently used in a number of countries around the world in various programming contexts.

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