



AUSTRALIA

Quick Facts

Population: 23,232,413 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 7,741,220 sq km

Ethnic Groups: English 25.9%, Australian 25.4%, Irish 7.5%, Scottish 6.4%, Italian 3.3%, German 3.2%, Chinese 3.1%, Indian 1.4%, Greek 1.4%, Dutch 1.2%, other 15.8% (includes Australian aboriginal .5%), unspecified 5.4%

GDP (official exchange rate): \$1.39 trillion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated May 2018)

INTRODUCTION

By global standards, the threat of Islamist violence in Australia is low. Generally, Australia has not proven fertile ground for global terrorist organizations, despite some attempts by such groups to recruit and fundraise there. The overwhelming majority of those convicted under the country's anti-terrorism laws seem to have belonged to small, independent, self-starting groups with no clear connection to any well-established global terrorist organization. Similarly, the very few individuals to have been in contact with such organizations have long since left them, and have shown little, if any, intention of undertaking terrorist acts in Australia. Notably, however, the threat of terrorism associated with the Islamic State (ISIS) has spiked within the country in the last year.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The Benbrika group

In November 2005, Australian federal and state intelligence and law enforcement agencies carried out the largest counterterrorism raids in the country's history. Twenty-one people were arrested and charged across Sydney and Melbourne between November 2005 and March 2006.¹ The senior figure in the affair was Abdul Nacer Benbrika, also known as Abu Bakr, an immigrant from Algeria who, at the time of his arrest, was in his mid-40s. The rest of those charged were considerably younger, mostly between 18 and 28. Several had minor criminal records for fraud, theft and firearms charges.²

Members of the Melbourne cluster were all charged with being members of a terrorist organization involved in the fostering or preparation of a terrorist act (a legal designation under Australian law). Some were also charged with providing resources to a terrorist organization. Benbrika himself was also charged with intentionally directing the activities of a terrorist organization.³ The Sydney cluster faced more serious charges of conspiring to plan a terrorist attack.

In February 2009, Benbrika was sentenced to 15 years in prison with a non-parole period of 12 years—considerably less than the maximum 25-year sentence available under the relevant legislation.⁴ It is possible this was due to the relatively embryonic nature of the group. The court found that the group

had not reached the stage of plotting to blow up specific targets when it was apprehended by authorities. By contrast, the Sydney cluster had been more advanced, with considerable stockpiles of weapons and chemicals.⁵ In October 2009, following the longest-running criminal trial in Australian legal history, five of its members were convicted (in addition to four others who had pled guilty) and subsequently sentenced to prison terms ranging from 21 to 28 years.⁶

Links between the Benbrika group and global terrorist organizations seem to have been sparse. Of the Melbourne cluster, only one attended a training camp overseas in Afghanistan, where he reportedly pledged allegiance to then-Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.⁷ The Sydney cluster seems to have had some deeper international experience, with up to three of its members having visited Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) training camps in Pakistan.⁸ Benbrika himself, however, appears to have had no sustained contact with global terrorist organizations.

Ideologically, the Benbrika group clearly held to a Wahhabi-Salafi ideology. First, the group viewed the world as divided between “true” Muslims and nonbelievers. Second, it believed that Islam was under attack from the Western world, particularly the United States, but also Australia. Third, the group held that the perceived campaigns against Islam waged by the West in Afghanistan and Iraq compelled the group’s members an obligation as devout Muslims to act in defense of Islam. That obligation took the form of an individual religious obligation to embark upon violence in Australia.⁹ Thus, the group’s views of their militancy were larger defensive, rather than imperial; they saw themselves as acting in the defense of Islam, rather than proceeding from an explicit desire to Islamize Australia or the world.

On November 3, 2017, Attorney-General George Brandis denied parole to Abdul Nacer Benbrika and sentenced him to another three years of imprisonment.¹⁰

Operation Neath

August 2009 saw the culmination of Australia’s second-largest counter-terrorism operation, in which five men were ultimately arrested and charged with conspiring to plan a terrorist attack on Holsworthy Barracks, an Australian Army training base.¹¹ The apparent plan was for members of the group to kill as many Australian soldiers as they could with automatic weapons before they themselves were killed.¹² The matter is currently before the courts.

The five men, all Australian citizens from Melbourne, were ethnically Lebanese and Somali. Authorities believe they were part of a broader group of 18 men, also ethnically Lebanese and Somali.¹³ There appears to have been an absence of a well-formulated overarching ideology. Although the group was definitively Wahhabi/Salafi in orientation, its political narrative appears to have been reactive and defensive, rather than actively imperial. Members expressed anger at the presence of Australian troops in Muslim countries, possibly Iraq and Afghanistan, although they did not mention these places by name.¹⁴

Unlike the Benbrika group, however, there appears to be no clear religious authority figure in this case. All of those charged were young, and publicly available information suggests the group to be horizontal in structure. However, authorities believe that the group apprehended in Operation Neath possessed links with Somalia’s al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate banned in the United States, and which American authorities allege has been actively recruiting Somali-American Muslims.¹⁵ News reports suggest several members of the group had attempted to travel to Somalia to train with al-Shabaab.¹⁶ A spokesman for al-Shabaab, however, has denied the allegations, claiming it has “no involvement at all” with the group and no people based in Australia.¹⁷

The Islamic State

Islamic state adherents have become more active in Australia in recent years. Beginning in September 2014, its most prolific raid to date involved 800 law enforcement agents in Brisbane and Sydney.¹⁸ Intelligence suggested that Muhammad Ali Baryalei, a senior Australian member of the Islamic State,

had ordered Australian Islamists to “kidnap and murder a randomly chosen non-Muslim member of the Public.”¹⁹ Law-enforcement officials arrested 16 people, although only one, Omarjan Azari, was charged. Omarjan Azari has pleaded not guilty to preparing to commit an act of terrorism, though he has admitted to sending funds to ISIS²⁰; his trial began in April 2017.²¹ As of late 2016, 15 people have been charged from the intelligence gathered in Operation Appleby, with the latest arrest occurring on May 26, 2016.²²

In August 2017, Khaled Khayat and Mahmoud Khayat were charged with two counts of preparing or planning a terrorist attack. The two brothers first attempted to smuggle a homemade bomb onto a July 15 Ethihad flight in the suitcase of a third brother, who was not aware of the plot.²³ The brothers ultimately aborted the attack. The bomb was hidden inside a meat mincer, but the bag may have been too heavy to be checked, prompting the Khayats to change their plans. Authorities believe that an ISIS controller sent the men the bomb-making materials through air cargo.²⁴ Khaled and Mahmoud then allegedly began to build a device that would release hydrogen sulphide, a toxic chemical, in a crowded public place. They were not far along in the process when captured by police.²⁵

Both Khaled and Mahmoud had been introduced to their ISIS handler via their brother, Tarek Khayat, in Syria.²⁶ In all, over 165 Australians are estimated to have journeyed to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State to date.²⁷ As of October 2017, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) head Duncan Lewis has said that approximately 40 of these foreign fighters had returned to Australia.²⁸

Individuals Connected to Terrorism

While the above events are certainly the most important in the history of Islamist militancy in Australia, several other individual Islamists have been convicted of terrorism-related offenses. Some of these have been Australian citizens who have made connections with Islamist terrorist groups overseas. Others are foreign nationals who attempted unsuccessfully to infiltrate Australia. None are presently active members of radical Islamist organizations.

Musa Cerantonio is an Australian preacher who used social media to both express his support for ISIL and propagate ISIL-related propaganda.²⁹ He was first arrested in 2014 in the Philippines while allegedly attempting to travel to Syria.³⁰ Upon his arrest, he was deported to Australia. Cerantonio is regarded as an influential advocate for ISIL.³¹ While his precise level of influence is unclear, Cerantonio is alleged to have associated with Singaporean ISIL sympathizer Zulfikar Shariff.³² In May 2016, he, along with five others, was arrested for attempting to sail to Indonesia, from where they were planning to travel to ISIL-controlled territory.³³

Numan Haider was the perpetrator of the September 2014 Endeavour Hills attack, in which he stabbed two anti-terrorism officers from the Joint Counter-Terrorism Team.³⁴ He was killed during the attack. Haider was also alleged to have associated with Al-Furqan. Subsequent inquiries into the incident have revealed evidence suggesting Haider viewed ISIL propaganda on his mobile phone two days prior to the attack.³⁵ He was also said to have attempted to find out then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s schedule. Haider, who came from a moderate Muslim family, was said to have been radicalized “within months.”³⁶

Omar Succarieh was accused of both funding terrorists abroad and attempting to aid Agim Kruezi’s (failed) migration to Syria.³⁷ Arrested in 2014, he allegedly financed Jahbat Al-Nusra.³⁸ Police believe he sent at least \$27,000 to the group.

Sevdet Besim was arrested for plotting the foiled 2015 Anzac Day attack.³⁹ Besim intended to “run over a police officer, cut off his head and go on a violent rampage that would end in his own death.”⁴⁰ He claimed to have been inspired by his friend, Numan Haider. Besim plotted the attack online with a teenager living in the UK.

Haisem Zahab was arrested in February 2017 for assisting ISIS in the development of long-range guided missiles. These plans were not for Australia, but for use in Iraq and Syria.⁴¹ His arrest came after a relative of his was charged by Kuwaiti authorities with trying to supply Islamic State with surface-to-air

missiles. In 2015, the Australian Federal Police seized \$500,000 from Hicham Zahab his wife Aminah, son Muhammad and daughter-in-law Mariam Raad under proceeds of crime laws, but the family is believed to have fled to Syria.⁴²

Other new arrests include the arrests of two teenage boys who killed service station attendant Zeeshan Akhbar in the Queanbeyan Stabbing incident in 2017, which also saw three others injured; only one perpetrator had links to terrorism, however.⁴³

Non-violent Islamist groups

Given Australia's status as a liberal democracy, Islamist groups can form freely and remain in existence provided they remain within the confines of the law. Accordingly, a number of Islamist organizations remain active in Australian society.

One of the most prominent groups the Islamic Information and Services Network of Australasia, headed by Samir Mohtadi. This organization is more politically moderate than other Wahhabi-Salafi groups. Mohtadi testified during the trial of the Benbrika group, saying that he warned Benbrika he would notify the authorities if he intended to do "anything stupid," and that Australia was a "peaceful country."⁴⁴

One of the most prominent non-violent extremist movements is the Al-Furqan Islamic Information Centre, a bookstore that "doubled" as a musallah, primarily for young Muslims, in South Melbourne.⁴⁵ It was led by Harun Mehicevic after he decided to part ways with the Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah (ASWJ) centre in 2011.⁴⁶ Like ASWJ, Al-Furqan's theological position is built upon Salafism. While it is unclear if Mehicevic advocated a politicized brand of Salafism, the organization was linked with at least six alleged and known Australian terrorists: Neil Prakash, Numan Haider, Adnan Karabegovic, Sevdet Besim, Harun Causevic, and Mohomod Unais Mohomed Ameen.⁴⁷

Prakash and Ameen have appeared in ISIL propaganda videos from ISIL controlled territories.⁴⁸ After being subject to multiple police raids since 2012, Mehicevic made the decision to cease Al-Furqan's operations in 2015.⁴⁹ However, it has been alleged that Al-Furqan continues to operate covertly from a suburban leisure center in Dandenong, Melbourne.⁵⁰ Notably, Mahicevic himself has not been accused or charged for terrorist offenses. Rather, it has been alleged that he was asked to assist the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) by leveraging his position to "spy" on ISIL.⁵¹

The most overtly Islamist organization in Australia is undoubtedly Hizb ut-Tahrir. The group attracted a slew of media attention following the 2005 London bombings, when banning the group became a topic of public discussion in Australia, mirroring Britain's public calls for a ban on the group.⁵² HuT treats the establishment of "the Khalifah system as explicit ideological aspiration."⁵³ Its methodology is based on non-violent resistance against secular democracy, and specifically relies on demonstrating the (in their view) intellectual, moral, and functional superiority the Khalifah system of governance vis-à-vis any other.⁵⁴ As such, HT appears to rely heavily on its online publishing arm, wherein critiques of Australian policies, particularly those on counter-terrorism, are commonplace (Hizb ut-Tahrir Australia, n.d.-c).⁵⁵ However, while HuT is a major presence in many countries, its members in Australia are very small in number and confined mostly to Sydney.⁵⁶

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

As a nation with a British political inheritance, a very small Muslim population and a strong enduring alliance with the United States, Australia is not a welcoming environment for Islamist movements, particularly violent ones. Islamism has no discernible public support as an ideology. Anyone who calls publicly for the incorporation of some part of Islamic law (typically family law) into the Australian legal system faces swift denunciation, to say nothing of those who openly support more radical Islamist ideas.⁵⁷

As the Muslim population of Australia continues to grow, both through population expansion and immigration, Muslim organizations can be expected to expand in size and number. The increase in the

number of mosques is inevitable as a result, there is no evidence of a surge in mosque construction, and there is nothing in the public domain to suggest an impending rise in terrorist activity beyond what has been seen since 2005. It is probably true that HuT's voice is gradually becoming louder (facilitated by media attention) but it remains closely monitored and of marginal influence.⁵⁸

Funding arrangements for Islamic organizations are more difficult to discern. The record to date suggests that would-be terrorist groups in Australia are not reliant on overseas funding for their plots, and indeed, as discussed above in relation to the Benbrika group, have attempted their own fundraising, often through fraudulent means.

More mainstream Islamic organizations have long been recipients of funding from both Australian and overseas governments. Among the most active has been the Saudi government, which is thought to have spent around AU\$120 million (roughly 91 million in U.S. dollars) in Australia since the 1970s.⁵⁹ It is reasonable to assume that this financial support played an important role in the emergence of Wahhabi Salafism in Australia over the decades that followed. In this regard, there have been periods of consternation in the Australian press over funding from the Saudi government, particularly of esteemed institutions such as Australian universities.⁶⁰ There is little to suggest, however, that funding flows from abroad have increased in the past decade, while the associated media coverage indicates that such funding arrangements would be heavily scrutinized once publicly known. The Australian government, too, has actively funded Islamic studies in Australian universities—most directly through the establishment of a National Centre of Excellence in Islamic Studies across three universities in three states at a cost of AU\$8 million (\$6 million U.S.).⁶¹ The center was conceived as part of the government's social cohesion, harmony and security strategy, and aims at teaching Islam in an Australian context.⁶²

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The Australian government responded to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent 2002 Bali bombings with a flurry of legislative activity. The suite of anti-terrorism laws introduced since that time have created new terrorism-related offenses under Australian law and greatly expanded the powers of police and intelligence agencies.⁶³ These laws have certainly been controversial for their impact on civil liberties, and there has been much criticism of the legislative process that produced them,⁶⁴ as well as the occasionally improper use of these powers and instances of improper conduct⁶⁵ by police and intelligence agencies.⁶⁵

In September 2014, the threat level of terrorism in Australia was raised from “medium” to “high,” indicating the imminent likelihood of a terrorist attack. This was the first time the threat level had been increased since 2002. The threat level assessment was based on a four-tier system, with “extreme” being the highest possible level. The threat level was maintained at “high” at least until September of 2015. In November 2015, the threat level assessment system changed from a four-tier to a five-tier one in response to the “changing domestic and international security landscape.”

Upon its introduction, the threat level assessment was indicated as “Probable,” indicating that Australian intelligence believed that terrorists have both the capability and intention to conduct an attack. Australia's National Security website indicates the threat level to still be “Probable.” Both “high” (the 3rd highest in the four-tier system) and “Probable” (the 3rd highest in the five-tier system) indicate the same quantitative and qualitative threat levels. Then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott said this five-tier system (“Not Expected,” “Possible,” “Probable,” “Expected,” and “Certain”) would be easier for laypeople to comprehend. The current national threat level for the country remains at “Probable.” At the federal level, Australian counter-terrorism efforts in the cybersphere have been overwhelmingly successful: a reported 83% of extremist content on social media referred by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) was deleted without formal request. Due to the perceived spike in militant jihad activity within the neighbouring Southeast Asian region, Canberra has also added Islamic State East Asia to its list of terrorist organizations, imposing a 25-year jail sentence for supporting the organisation in any way.

The Brighton Siege also generated further consensus on the need for stricter anti-terrorism laws. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to amend current legislation to deny parole and bail to any persons found guilty of supporting or being linked to terrorist activity.⁶⁶ In October 2017, the COAG further agreed to allow suspects aged 10-years-old and above to be held without charge for a fortnight in addition to real-time availability of driver license photos to facilitate identification of suspects.⁶⁷ The Federal Government has also adopted measures to give the Defence Force powers to assist state and federal police with terrorism, though police would continue to be the primary respondents to such attacks.⁶⁸ Moreover, in a bid to reduce numbers of illicit firearms and thus combat terrorism, Canberra introduced gun amnesty for the first time in two decades:⁶⁹ In January 2017, the Turnbull administration considered uniting the AFP, ASIO, and Australian Border Force in a new security and terrorism portfolio⁷⁰, though this proposal was later rejected by the AFP.

At the state level, the Victoria government announced the establishment of a new police unit and threat assessment center at Victoria Police's Spencer Street complex in October 2017.⁷¹ Though not specifically aimed at Islamic or religiously motivated attacks, the center and its agents will monitor and manage individuals at risk of radicalisation or those who pose threats of committing lone wolf attacks.⁷² The center's establishment is based on similar precedents in other Australian states, such as Queensland, and was prompted by the Bourke Street Mall incident.⁷³ The center will monitor up to 300 people annually; if necessary, it will refer at-risk people to mental health services or charge them.⁷⁴ This initiative comes two years after the Victorian state government announced the creation in 2015 of an AUD25 million taskforce over four years to eradicate youth radicalization.⁷⁵ In January, the New South Wales government also created a new counter-terrorism ministerial post at the state level.⁷⁶

The threat from Islamism in Australia, especially the radical variant, while real and ongoing, has grown significantly since 2013. To date, in spite of the occasional overuse of force, attempts at law enforcement have been successful in monitoring and prosecuting the main threats stemming from Islamic radicalism. Among the challenges Australia will face in the future is managing returning Australian fighters from Syria and Iraq, and maintaining its counterterrorism investigatory structure.

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