American Foreign Policy Council

Australia

QUICK FACTS

Population: 22,262,501

Area: 7,741,220 sq km

Ethnic Groups: white 92%, Asian 7%, Aboriginal and other 1%

Religions: Catholic 25.8%, Anglican 18.7%, Uniting Church 5.7%, Presbyterian and Reformed 3%, Eastern Orthdox 2.7%, other Christian 7.9%, Buddhist 2.1%, Muslim 1.7%, other 2.4%, unspecified 11.3%, none 18.7%

Government Type: Federal parliamentary democracy and Commonwealth realm

GDP (official exchange rate): $1.542 trillion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2013)

The shallow presence and short history of Islamism in Australia is very much a function of Australia's comparatively small Muslim population (just 2.2 percent of the country's total of 21.5 million, or approximately 476, 300 people).[1] *By the standards of other Western democracies, the threat of Islamist violence in Australia is relatively low. While recent years have seen several Islamists convicted of terrorism-related offenses, none of these trials have provided evidence of any specific, well-developed terror plots that were nearing execution. 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. Accordingly, violent Islamism in Australia fits a decentralized model of political behavior, rather than a more traditional, structured, organizational one.

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 as part of a long-running investigation known as "Operation Pendennis." Seventeen people were arrested and charged across Sydney and Melbourne at that time, with another charged a week later and an additional three charged in late March 2006.[2] 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 variously reported as being 45 or 46. The rest of those charged were considerably younger, mostly between 18 and 28. All except one came from immigrant families, with the dominant ethnicity among them Lebanese. A majority of the Melbourne group was Australian-born, and one of the accused was an Anglo-Australian convert to Islam. Neither the Melbourne nor Sydney groups seem to have been highly educated or wealthy. Most were tradesmen or laborers, and only one participant had a tertiary degree. Moreover, several had minor criminal records for fraud, theft and firearms charges.[3]

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 or making funds available to a terrorist organization, as well as possessing materiel connected to terrorism. Benbrika himself was also charged with intentionally directing the activities of a terrorist organization.[4] The Sydney cluster faced more serious charges of conspiring to plan a terrorist attack.

The Melbourne trial commenced first, resulting in seven convictions, four acquittals, and one retrial. 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.[5] It is possible this was due to the relatively embryonic nature of the group. For example, the court found that the group had not reached the stage of plotting to blow up specific targets.

By contrast, the Sydney cluster was more advanced, with considerable stockpiles of weapons and chemicals.[6] 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.[7] In 2011, all the men failed in attempts to have their convictions for belonging to a terrorist group overturned. However, with the exception of Benbrika, the other six had their jail terms reduced by one to two years. They were also spared an imminent second trial for more serious offenses, after a Supreme Court judge ruled that the proceedings would be an abuse of process and "oppressive".[8]

Links between the Benbrika group and global terrorist organizations seem to have been sparse. Of the Melbourne cluster, Anglo-Australian Shane Kent was the only one to have attended a training camp overseas in Afghanistan where he reportedly pledged allegiance, and may have been introduced, to Osama bin Laden.[9] Nevertheless, prosecutors dropped charges alleging Kent provided support to al-Qaeda.[10] The Sydney cluster seems to have had some deeper international experience, with up to three of them having visited Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) training camps in Pakistan.[11] Benbrika himself, however, appears to have had no sustained contact with global terrorist organizations. The only encounter on the public record was in 1994, when the British-based al-Qaeda sheikh Abu Qatadah visited Australia as a guest of the Melbourne-based Salafi imam Mohamed Omran. News reports suggest Benbrika's radicalization can be traced to his exposure to Abu Qatadah's speeches during that tour.[12]

Abu Qatadah's host, Mohamed Omran, is one of Australia's highest-profile Wahhabi-Salafi imams, the head of the Ahlus Sunnah Wa-l-Jamaah Association, and a central figure in any consideration of radical Islamism in Australia. To date, no public evidence has emerged connecting Omran to terrorism directly, and the suspicion that surrounds him is by association. In addition to his connections with Abu Qatadah, he has been named in Spanish court documents as an associate of al-Qaeda's Abu Dada (a charge which he has denied).[13] At the time of Abu Qatadah's speaking tour of Australia, and for several years thereafter, Benbrika was one of Omran's followers. Their relationship seems to have ended some years before Benbrika's arrest, when he left Omran's organization because he found it insufficiently radical.[14] Benbrika's own followers in the Melbourne cluster appear to have continued attending Omran's center, but there is no doubt that Benbrika was their most important influence at this time.[15]

Ideologically, the Benbrika group clearly held to a Wahhabi-Salafi ideology. First, the group believed in a bifurcated view of the world in which there

was to be hostility between those who adhered to their version of Islam and everyone else. 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 imposed on the group's members an obligation as devout Muslims to act in defense of Islam and Muslims. Fourth, that obligation took the form of an individual religious obligation to embark upon violence in Australia.[16] Thus, the group's views of their militancy were larger defensive, rather than imperial; they saw themselves as acting in the defense of Islam and Muslims, rather than proceeding from an explicit desire to Islamize Australia or the world.

Consistent with its independent, self-starting nature, the Benbrika group was informally and independently funded. Some members would contribute to a *sanduq*, or central fund, mainly through minor crimes such as car theft and credit card fraud.[17] By all accounts, it received no external funding from well-established terrorist organizations.

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.[18] The plan was for members of the group to kill as many Australian soldiers as they could with automatic weapons before they themselves were killed.[19] All five had been part of the same religious "reading group" at a small mosque led by the former Mufti of Australia, Sheikh Fehmi Neji Al-Imam.

The five men, all Australian citizens from Melbourne, were of Lebanese and Somali extraction. The group seems to have similar professional and educational backgrounds to the Benbrika group discussed above. None were believed to have tertiary education, and most were either laborers or taxi drivers.[20] Likewise, 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. Members regularly expressed anger at the presence of Australian troops in Muslim countries, possibly Iraq and Afghanistan, although they did not mention these places by name.[21]

Unlike the Benbrika group, however, there appears to be no clear religious authority figure in this case. All of those charged are young, and the group appears to be horizontal in structure. Two of the men played a more important role; Wissam Mahmoud Fattal had reconnoitered the Holsworthy Bar-

racks and had confirmed the base as a suitable target. Another conspirator, Yacqub Khayre had travelled to Somalia to get permission from militant Somali clerics to conduct the attacks.[22] The jury in the case found three of the alleged conspirators guilty, while two other were released.[23]

The other key development in this case is the group's Somali connection—the first alleged involvement of Somali Australians in radical Islamist activity. Indeed, a 2007 investigation by the Australian Federal Police of extremism within the Australian Muslim Somali community found no evidence of any illegal activity.[24] Initial reports suggested several members of the group had attempted to travel to Somalia to train 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.[25] These links were proven to be overstated during the course of the trial, however. A spokesman for al-Shabaab has also denied the allegations, claiming it has "no involvement at all" with the group and no people based in Australia.[26] Nevertheless, the Australian opposition called for al-Shabaab to be listed as a terrorist organisation in Australia. Later in August, 2009, the Australian authorities decided to list Al-Shabaab as a terrorist organization.[27]

Individuals connected to terrorism

While the aforementioned 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. They are:

- **David Hicks**, an Anglo-Australian convert to Islam who travelled to Albania and joined the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).[28] Hicks undertook four weeks of training with the KLA and enlisted with NATO, but the conflict ended before he could do any fighting, and he was sent home under NATO orders.[29] Upon returning to Australia he attempted to join the Australian Army, but was rejected.[30] In November 1999, he flew to Pakistan, where he spent three months in a Lashkar e-Taiba training camp. From there, he traveled on to Afghanistan where he spent eight months in 2001 in an al-Qaeda training camp. He saw Osama bin Laden approximately eight times during this time, and spoke to him once.[31]

  Following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, Hicks was sent to the front line to fight with the Taliban. He insists he saw no action, and never fired his weapon. Indeed, the front to which he was sent col-

lapsed only hours after he arrived. Two weeks later, Hicks attempted to leave the country, but was captured by the Northern Alliance, which transferred him to U.S. Special Forces for $1,000.[32] Hicks subsequently was detained in the Guantànamo Bay detention facility for just under five-and-a-half years. He was first charged by a Military Commission in August 2004, but that commission was abolished in 2006, after the Supreme Court ruled it illegal in *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*. Subsequently, in March 2007, Hicks was formally charged with providing material support for terrorism and tried before a Special Military Commission. He pleaded guilty and became the first person convicted by the Guantànamo Military Tribunal. He was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, all but nine months of which was suspended.[33]

Hicks has since served his sentence and been released into the community. Initially, he was placed under a control order that required him to report to a police station three times weekly. The control order expired in December 2008, however, and the Australian Federal Police did not seek to renew it— indicating Hicks was no longer considered a threat.[34] In October 2012, Hicks appealed against his conviction after the U.S. Court of Appeals found the conviction of Osama bin Laden's former driver, Salim Hamdan, invalid because under the international law of war at the time there was no such crime as "providing material support for terrorism."[35] In May 2013, Hick lodged to appeal against his conviction.[36] Moazzam Begg, a former Guantànamo Bay detainee who met Hicks in detention, has said that Hicks is no longer a Muslim, and ceased being one sometime early in his detention.[37] Hicks has since written an autobiography detailing his experience in Guantanamo Bay.[38]

- **Joseph Thomas**, who in early 2001 travelled to Afghanistan to join the Taliban's fight against the Northern Alliance. There, Thomas received training in al-Qaeda's Camp Faruq, spent time with David Hicks, and met Osama bin Laden at least once.[39] Thomas spent a week on the front line in Afghanistan after his training, but did not participate in any combat. Over the four months that followed, he was in contact with senior al-Qaeda figures such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, Mohammed Atef, and Saif el Adel, seeking help with income and accommodation. He claims he did not know who these people were at the time.[40] With the commencement of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, Thomas remained to fight American forces. At that time, he shared a guesthouse with 9/11 planner Ramzi bin al-Shibh, and was asked by al-Qaeda's Abu Zubaida to "do some work."[41] Thomas' time with Abu Zubaida took him to Pakistan, where he met the alleged mastermind of the *USS Cole* bombing, Khalid bin Attash. Bin Attash asked Thomas to

undertake an attack in Australia.[42] Thomas was given $3,500 and a plane ticket to Australia for this purpose. However, he has maintained at all times that he had no intention of executing such an attack, and that the money he received was merely compensation for his time and maintenance, rather than for terrorism.[43] Yet, before he could board his flight, Thomas was arrested by Pakistan's ISI, and subsequently was tortured.

Around this time, the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Security and Intelligence Organization questioned Thomas, who provided a detailed statement. In June 2003, Pakistani authorities released Thomas and flew him to Australia, where he remained free for around 17 months until finally arrested. Thomas was charged with receiving funds and resources from a terrorist organization that would assist in a terrorist attack, as well as with travelling on a falsified passport.[44] Following a high-profile trial, Thomas was acquitted of the most serious offenses—largely because most of the evidence on which they were based was tainted by his torture at the hands of the ISI. At the end of the appeal process, Thomas was finally convicted on the falsified passport charge, as well as for receiving funds from a terrorist organization. He was sentenced to nine months in prison, and upon his release, was made subject to a control order that, among other restrictions, prohibits from contacting certain figures involved in terrorism and imposes a curfew.[45] In December 2006, Thomas was ordered to face a re-trial. A court verdict in October 2008 availed of all terrorism charges but he was found guilty for passport offenses. The judge, however, ruled that he was to be released after taking into account his initial prison sentence.[46]

- **Faheem Lodhi**, an Australian citizen who immigrated to Australia from Pakistan in 1996. In June 2006, he was convicted of acting in preparation for a terrorist attack and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. Key elements of the prosecution's case included that Lodhi had sought information about chemicals capable of making explosives, possessed a terrorism manual, and had maps of the electricity grid.[47] It is suspected that he was targeting the national electricity supply, as well as various Army barracks and training areas. During the trial, it emerged that Lodhi had trained with LeT in Pakistan, where he met al- Qaeda operative Willie Brigitte. Lodhi was also Brigitte's main contact when Brigitte visited Australia.[48] Brigitte himself was deported from Australia for visa violations, before finally being convicted in a French court and sentenced to nine years in prison for planning a terrorist attack in Australia.[49]

- **Jack Roche**, a British immigrant to Australia who converted to Islam in his late 30s. Soon after his conversion, Roche had contact with twin

brothers Abdulrahman and Abdulrahim Ayub, who are suspected of being Australia's representatives of the Indonesian terrorist group Jemaah Islamiah (JI). In 1996, Roche met Abdullah Sungkar, founder of JI, in Sydney and pledged his oath of allegiance to the group.[50] The Ayub twins sent Roche to Malaysia to meet JI leader Hambali in 2000. From there, Roche was sent to Pakistan, where he trained in explosives in an al-Qaeda camp and met Osama bin Laden.[51] The Al-Qaeda leadership subsequently asked Roche to return to Australia to gather information about the Israeli embassy in Canberra, as well as on Joseph Gutnick, a wealthy Jewish-Australian businessman. In June 2000, Roche set to work, filming the outside of the embassy. However, he could not go through with the attack and went to the Australian Intelligence and Security Organization to inform them of the events. Yet, in Roche's words, "no one seemed to be particularly interested in what was going on."[52]

It was only after the Bali bombings in October 2002 that Australian law enforcement and security agencies took a fresh look at domestic militancy, which resulted ultimately in Roche's arrest and conviction for the embassy plot.[53] He was sentenced to nine years in prison with a parole period of half that time, and was released in May 2007.[54]

Non-violent Islamist groups

The fact that Australia is a liberal democracy means Islamist groups can form freely and remain in existence provided they remain within the law. In fact, the threat posed from these organizations seems to have increased in recent times. A number of Islamist organizations which are overtly non-violent are active in the country. Nonetheless, these organizations teach a more radical interpretation of Islam which is aimed at radicalizing Australian Muslims at the ideological level.

One of the most worrisome, from a security perspective, is Mohamed Omran's Ahlus Sunnah wa-l-Jamaah Association (ASWJ). Nothing on the public record links the Association to violence directly, and its representatives have consistently denied their support for terrorism.[55] Nevertheless, public concerns surround Omran because of his connections with the al-Qaeda figures discussed above, and for his statements in support of Osama bin Laden (whom he insists did not have any involvement with the 9/11 attacks).[56] Since 2007, Omran seems to have taken a back seat and his group is currently led by Sheikh Feiz Mohamed.

Another organization led by Mohamed is the Sydney's Global Islamic Youth Centre.[57] Mohamed has long been a controversial Muslim figure in Australia. In 2005, he was quoted blaming rape victims for their "indecent dress-

ing."[58] In 2005, he left Australia for Lebanon following the Benbrika case to escape surveillance from the Australian Security Intelligence Organization.[59] In 2010, Mohamed came back to Australia and has played a more prominent role in the ASWJ. The organization appointed him as its full time *Amir* (leader) in 2011. Mohamed himself has begun preaching in a more militant tone. In September 2010, Mohamed was again in the limelight following remarks he made about beheading Dutch politician, Geertz Wilders, for the former's perceived vilification of Islam.[60] In July 2011, Mohamed's follower, Wassim Fayad lashed a Sydney man 40 times under the name of Muslim Sharia law, as punishment for drinking alcohol.[61] Mohamed has now emerged as one of the leading extremist preachers in Australia. His online sermons have radicalized many Muslim youths around the world.[62] Mohamed is likely to remain in the spotlight over the next several years due to his radical preaching. None of these groups publicly advocate the forceful Islamization of Australia, however.

The other prominent Wahhabi-Salafi organization of note is the Islamic Information and Services Network of Australasia headed by Samir Mohtadi. This organization is more politically moderate than other Wahhabi-Salafi groups, and broke from Omran's group many years before domestic terrorism became a public issue. 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."[63] Mohtadi is focused on *dawah*, or preaching, rather than the forceful transformation of society.

The most overtly Islamist organization in Australia is undoubtedly Hizb ut-Tahrir.[64] The Australian chapter of this transnational movement was founded in the 1970s by a Jordanian member, Sheikh Ismail Al-Wahwah. Al-Wahwah fled Jordan after being implicated for his involvement in a coup attempt against the Jordan's King Hussein in 1974.[65] The group attracted a slew of media attention following the 2005 London bombings, when banning the group became a public discussion in Australia, mirroring Britain's public calls for a ban on the group.[66] HuT has engaged in a highly sophisticated media campaign, with spokesmen such as Uthman Badar issuing highly controversial statements. These have garnered the group media attention surpassing its size and influence. While HuT is a major presence in many countries, its members in Australia are very small in number and confined to Sydney and Melbourne.[67]

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

As a nation with a British political inheritance, a very small Muslim popula-

tion and a strong enduring alliance with the United States, Australia is a hostile environment for Islamist movements, particularly violent ones. Islamism has no discernible public or governmental 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.[68]

Accordingly, none of the aforementioned Islamist organizations receive government patronage, and there is little if any evidence that their popularity and level of support in the Australian community extends significantly beyond their own memberships. Debate continues in Australia as to whether or not HuT, for instance, should be banned even within Muslim circles.[69]

As the Muslim population of Australia continues to grow, both through procreation and immigration, Muslim organizations can be expected to expand in size and number. However, while an 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.[70] Nevertheless, a certain segment of young Australian Muslims is beginning to exert their Muslim identity through association with radical Muslim groups. This has led to some level of street violence. In September 2012, protests against a film denigrating Islam and the Prophet Muhammad led to riots resulting in some injuries.[71] While this incident was an exception to the normally peaceful protests by Muslim groups, it is symptomatic of the growing radicalization of some Muslim youths in Australia.

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 in Australia since the 1970s.[72] 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 Austra-

lian universities.[73] 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.[74] 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.[75]

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 and greatly expanded the powers of police and intelligence agencies.[76] 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,[77] as well as the occasionally improper use of these powers and instances of improper conduct by police and intelligence agencies.[78] These new regulations, however, have netted concrete results; the terrorism-related convictions of the Benbrika group, Joseph Thomas, Faheem Lodhi and Jack Roche were all secured under the new, post-9/11 legal regime in Australia.

Some controversy has also attached to the manner in which counterterrorism raids have been conducted, particularly where excessive force has been used, or where it appears media organizations have known of them in advance. This was most clear in the case of "Operation Neath," and has prompted an Australian Federal Police investigation.[79]

Australian authorities have also taken some steps towards a social approach to counterterrorism. In September 2005, the Howard government established a Muslim Community Reference Group to look into areas of social need in Muslim communities, including those elements thought to contribute to radicalization—such as education, employment and social cohesion.[80] Similarly, some police forces around the country, including the Australian Federal Police, have expanded their community engagement programs.[81]

Not all of these measures have been well received among Australian Muslims. The introduction of anti-terrorism laws caused significant Muslim protest, and these measures have been regularly criticized by Muslim groups for contributing to further alienation and facilitating coercive and intimidating

behavior from authorities.[82] While there is some evidence suggesting that the impact of harsh legislation and the negative tone of public discourse are having a radicalizing effect in Australia,[83] this is impossible to quantify. Similarly, the Muslim Community Reference Group has faced criticism for being a forum for lecturing to the Muslim community and encouraging Muslims to identify radicals for the government under the guise of community engagement, as well as for perpetuating the connection between Muslims and terrorism.[84] In response to criticisms against these anti-terror laws from the Muslim community and civil liberties groups, the Australian government is currently reviewing its anti-terror laws which might see the powers of the Australian intelligence outfits curbed.[85]

Whatever the impact of these government responses has been, it remains true that the threat from Islamism in Australia, while real and continuing, is small by global standards. 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. No global terrorist organization of any note has established deep links in Australia, and the threat seems to be confined to largely disconnected, home-grown and independently-organized groups. The few connections that exist with major global organizations are typically shallow, or confined to individuals that have already been convicted of terrorism offenses.

ENDNOTES

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