



AUSTRALIA

Quick Facts

Population: 25,809,973 (July 2021 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% (2011 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate):\$1.39 trillion (2019 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2021)

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 at recruitment and fundraising there by radical elements. The overwhelming majority of those convicted under the country's anti-terrorism laws belonged to small, independent, self-starting groups with no clear connection to established global terrorist organizations. The few individuals who had links to such organizations have long since left them and show little, if any, intention of undertaking large-scale terrorist acts in Australia. Notably, however, the threat of terrorism associated with the Islamic State (ISIS) has grown in recent years, as the group has gained strength in the Muslim world. That threat, and the organization's larger appeal, persists, despite the collapse of the ISIS caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The Benbrika group

In November 2005, Australian 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

Those in 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 additionally 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 because the group had not begun plotting to blow up specific targets. In contrast, the Sydney cluster was more advanced, with considerable stockpiles of weapons and chemicals.⁵ In October 2009, following the longest-running criminal trial in Australian legal history, a total of nine members were convicted and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 21 to 28 years.⁶

Links between the Benbrika group and global terrorist organizations appear sparse. Only one Melbourne cluster member attended a training camp overseas in Afghanistan, where he reportedly pledged allegiance to then-Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.⁷ The Sydney cluster had some international experience, with at least 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 adhered to *Wahhabi*-Salafism. First, it 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 members believed that perceived Western campaigns against Islam in Afghanistan and Iraq obligated them, as devout Muslims, to “defend” Islam by performing violent acts in Australia.⁹

On November 3, 2017, Attorney-General George Brandis denied parole to Abdul Nacer Benbrika and sentenced him to another three years in prison.¹⁰ Throughout his sentence, Benbrika refused to enroll in government-operated deradicalization programs. The Australian government still considers Benbrika a dangerous agent of radicalization. Authorities announced plans to transfer Benbrika to Barwon Prison, a maximum security detention facility for high-risk criminals. While his sentence ostensibly expired in 2020, the government applied to keep him behind bars for as many as three more years, and in February 2021 that “Continuing Detention Order” was granted by an Australian court. It also petitioned successfully to strip him of his citizenship.¹¹

Operation Neath

In August 2009, five men were arrested and charged with conspiring to carry out a terrorist attack on Holsworthy Barracks, an Australian Army training base, during Australia’s second-longest counter-terrorism operation.¹² The arrested group members – individuals that were part of a suspected 18 person cell with alleged connections to Somali Islamist group and al-Qaeda affiliate *al-Shabaab* – sought to kill as many Australian soldiers as they could with automatic weapons before they themselves were killed.¹³

The group was *Wahhabi*-Salafi in orientation, and reports suggested that several members had attempted to travel to Somalia to train with al-Shabaab. A spokesman for al-Shabaab, however, denied the allegations.¹⁴ Three of the men were sentenced in 2011 to 18 years in prison, while two others were acquitted. One of them, Yacqub Khayre, went on to orchestrate the 2017 siege of an apartment complex in the Melbourne suburb of Brighton, during which one person was killed.¹⁵

The Islamic State (IS)

Islamic State adherents have become more active in Australia in recent years. The most significant raid against IS to date took place in 2015 and involved 800 law enforcement agents in Brisbane and Sydney.¹⁶

Homegrown ISIS affiliations are an increasing concern. In all, as of 2017, over 165 Australians were estimated to have journeyed to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State.¹⁷ The same year, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) head Duncan Lewis said that approximately 40 of these foreign fighters had returned to Australia.¹⁸ Subsequently, in July 2019, Sydney authorities arrested Australian national and 20-year-old Isaak el Matari, a self-proclaimed “general of Islamic State.” El Matari was charged with three crimes, including membership in ISIS and planning terrorist attacks. El Matari planned to smuggle contraband into Australia, set up an operating base in the nearby Blue Mountains, and execute terror attacks throughout Sydney. He had already collected American military fatigues and sought a visa to

Pakistan, where he allegedly planned to illegally enter Afghanistan. Law enforcement personnel flagged el Matari in 2018 when he returned from Lebanon. Authorities also arrested two men in connection with el Matari: Radwan Dakkak, a 23-year-old male from Toongabbie on charges of ISIS membership, and a 30-year-old associate on fraud charges.¹⁹

Australia's top counterterrorism priority remains managing the potential risk posed by returning Australian fighters from Syria and Iraq, as well as securing the repatriation of orphaned children of Australian ISIS members from abroad. Intensive deradicalization programs are being developed to successfully reintegrate these children into Australian society, but the challenge of returning fighters is proving difficult.²⁰ The problem, moreover, is significant in scope; in the wake of the U.S.-led military victory over the organization in Iraq and Syria, many ISIS fighters have moved on while leaving family members behind in Syria. By some estimates, thousands of ISIS family members – including Australian citizens – are currently residing in Syria, with militants still operating in Iraq. The Australian government is reluctant to take these citizens back home, even if they are apprehended.²¹

Individuals Connected to Terrorism

Some Australian citizens have made connections with Islamist terrorist groups overseas, while 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 express support for the Islamic State and propagate ISIL-related propaganda.²² He also allegedly associated with Singaporean ISIL sympathizer Zulfikar Shariff.²³ He was first arrested in 2014 in the Philippines while allegedly attempting to travel to Syria and was deported back to Australia.²⁴ Cerantonio is an influential advocate for ISIL.²⁵ 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.²⁶

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.²⁷ He was killed during the attack. Haider was also allegedly 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.²⁸ He also attempted to find out then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott's schedule. Haider, who came from a moderate Muslim family, was supposedly radicalized "within months."²⁹

Omar Succarieh was accused of both funding terrorists abroad and attempting to aid Agim Kruezi's (failed) migration to Syria.³⁰ Arrested in 2014, he allegedly financed Jabhat Al-Nusra.³¹ Police believed he sent at least \$27,000 to the group. Succarieh pleaded guilty to several charges in 2016 and received a four-and-a-half-year prison sentence. After serving the majority of that sentence, Succarieh was released from prison in January 2020.³²

Sevdet Besim was arrested for plotting the foiled 2015 Anzac Day attack.³³ 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."³⁴ 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.³⁵ His arrest came after Kuwaiti authorities alleged that a relative of his, Hicham Zahab, tried to supply the Islamic State with surface-to-air missiles. In 2015, the Australian Federal Police seized \$500,000 from Hicham Zahab and his family under proceeds of crime laws, but they are believed to have fled to Syria.³⁶

Momena Shoma, a Bangladeshi national, was sentenced to 42 years in prison in June 2019 for stabbing a man in the name of *jihad* in February 2018.³⁷ Ihsas Khan was sentenced in May 2019 to a minimum of 27 years in prison for stabbing a man multiple times with intent to kill while shouting "Allahu akbar."³⁸ Two teenage boys, one of whom had links to terrorism, killed service station attendant Zeeshan Akhbar in the

2017 and the Queanbeyan stabbing incident, which also saw three others injured.³⁹

Non-violent Islamist groups

One of the most prominent groups is 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 Benbrika trials that he warned Benbrika he would notify the authorities if Benbrika intended to do “anything stupid,” and that Australia was a “peaceful country.”⁴⁰

A prominent non-violent extremist movement is the Al-Furqan Islamic Information Centre, a bookstore that “doubled” as a *musallah*, primarily for young Muslims, in South Melbourne.⁴¹ It was led by Harun Mehicevic after he decided to part ways with the *Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jamaah* (ASWJ) centre in 2011.⁴² Like ASWJ, Al-Furqan’s theological position is built upon Salafism. While it is unclear if Mehicevic advocated for politicized 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 Mohamed Ameen.⁴³ Prakash and Ameen both appeared in ISIL propaganda videos from ISIL controlled territories.⁴⁴ After being targeted in multiple police raids beginning in 2012, Mehicevic ended Al-Furqan’s operations in 2015.⁴⁵ However, some alleged that Al-Furqan operates covertly from a suburban leisure center in Dandenong, Melbourne.⁴⁶

Mehicevic himself has not been accused or charged for terrorist offenses. Rather, some people claim he was asked to assist the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) by leveraging his position to “spy” on ISIL.⁴⁷

Undoubtedly the most visible Islamist organization in Australia is *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HuT). The group attracted extensive media attention following the 2005 London bombings, when banning the group became a topic of public discussion in Australia.⁴⁸ HuT treats the establishment of “the Khalifah system as explicit ideological aspiration.”⁴⁹ Its methodology relies on non-violent resistance against secular democracy, as well as demonstrating the intellectual, moral, and functional superiority.⁵⁰ As such, HuT relies heavily on its online publishing arm, wherein critiques of Australian policies, particularly those on counter-terrorism, are commonplace.⁵¹ However, it has few members in Australia who are mostly confined to Sydney.⁵²

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

As a nation with a British political inheritance, a very small (but growing) 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 any type of Islamic law (typically family law) into the Australian legal system faces swift denunciation.⁵³

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, but as of yet there is no evidence of a surge in mosque construction. 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.⁵⁴

Funding streams for Islamic organizations in Australia are difficult to discern. Would-be terrorist groups in Australia are not reliant on overseas funding for their plots, though they are known to have been recipients of funding from both domestic sources and overseas governments for some time. One of the most active overseas financiers is the Saudi government, which has allegedly spent around AU\$120 million (roughly USD \$91 million) in Australia since the 1970s.⁵⁵ It is reasonable to assume that this financial support played a role in the emergence of *Wahhabi*-Salafism in Australia. In this regard, there have been periods of alarm in the Australian press over funding from the Saudi government, particularly

of Australian universities.⁵⁶ There is little to suggest, however, that funding from abroad has increased in the past decade. 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.).⁵⁷ The center was conceived as part of the government’s social cohesion, harmony, and security strategy, and aimed to teach Islam in an Australian context.⁵⁸ According to the University of Melbourne website, all three universities involved in the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies – the University of Melbourne, Griffith University, and the University of Western Sydney - “have gone on to establish their own independent Islamic studies programs” since 2011.⁵⁹

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The suite of anti-terrorism laws introduced since 9/11 have created new terrorism-related offenses under Australian law and greatly expanded the powers of police and intelligence agencies in the country.⁶⁰ These laws have been controversial for their impact on civil liberties, as has the legislative process that produced them.⁶¹ What’s more, sometimes the use of these powers has been deemed improper.⁶²

In September 2014, the threat level of terrorism in Australia was raised from “medium” to “high” for the first time since 2002. The threat level assessment was based on a four-tier system with “extreme” being the highest possible level. The threat level remained at “high” until September 2015. In November 2015, the threat level assessment system changed from a four-tier to a five-tier (“Not Expected,” “Possible,” “Probable,” “Expected,” and “Certain”) one in response to the “changing domestic and international security landscape” and the new threat level was deemed “probable.”⁶³ Due to the perceived spike in militant *jihad* activity within the neighboring Southeast Asian region, Australia also added Islamic State East Asia to its list of terrorist organizations in September 2017, imposing a 25-year jail sentence for supporting the organization in any way.⁶⁴

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) amended legislation to deny parole and bail to anyone found guilty of supporting or being linked to terrorist activity.⁶⁵

The Federal Government has adopted measures to give the Defense Force powers to assist state and federal police with terrorism, though police would continue to be the primary respondents.⁶⁶ Moreover, in a bid to reduce the number of illicit firearms and thus combat terrorism, Australia introduced gun amnesty for the first time in two decades.⁶⁷ In January 2017, the Turnbull administration considered uniting the AFP, ASIO, and Australian Border Force in a security and terrorism portfolio.⁶⁸ However, this proposal was rejected.

At the state level, in October 2017, the Victoria government announced a new police unit and threat assessment center.⁶⁹ Though not specifically aimed at Islamic or religiously motivated attacks, the center and its agents will monitor and manage individuals at risk of radicalization or those who pose threats.⁷⁰ This initiative came two years after the Victorian state government announced the creation in 2015 of an AU\$25 million taskforce over four years to eradicate youth radicalization.⁷¹ The center’s establishment is based on similar precedents in other Australian states, such as Queensland and New South Wales.⁷² Authorities built the center to monitor up to 300 people annually, and to refer at-risk people to mental health services or charge them as necessary.⁷³ Six months after its opening in March 2018, Victoria’s Fixed Threat Assessment Center (FTAC) had deradicalized 90 people showing early signs of violent extremism. From its opening until May 2019, FTAC processed 231 referrals, falling short of the initial target. As of July 2019, Victorian law enforcement authorities were optimistic about reaching the 300-people target in the near future.⁷⁴

In 2019, the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand spurred Australia and other G20 countries to examine the role tech and social media companies play in enabling extremism. The result, according to a Reuters report on August 25, 2019, was new legislation giving law enforcement authorities to “block

access to internet domains hosting terrorist material during crisis events.”⁷⁵

The Federal Government has taken steps to block broadcasts of terrorist attacks via the internet. In the aftermath of the livestreamed New Zealand Christchurch attacks in 2019, Australian authorities passed and enacted legislation that requires social media companies to (1) notify the Australian Federal Police if they discover livestreamed terrorist attacks on their platforms, and (2) remove such broadcasts, subject to stringent sanctions up to and including a \$840,000 fine. In October 2019, a gunman killed two people in a synagogue in Halle, Germany while livestreaming the attack on Twitch, an online video streaming platform. Twitch removed the broadcast 30 minutes after it ended and notified Australian authorities. Australian e-Safety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant reacted, “So far, the protocols taken by social media companies to thwart the spread of this material appear to be working effectively.”⁷⁶

Of late, the Australian government has moved against other Islamist groups as well. Following the lead of other countries, an Australian parliamentary committee recommended on June 22, 2021 that the government list the entirety of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. The recommendation coincided with Canada’s renewal of a terrorism listing for both Hezbollah and Hamas the same month.⁷⁷

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