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Time for a new grand strategy

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The tragic shooting in Parramatta on 2 October² can be linked to a dispute between Sunni and Shia Islam that goes back to the year 632 over who should succeed Muhammad as caliph. Roughly 85–90 per cent of the world's Muslims are Sunni and 10–15 per cent are Shia – including the Alawite minority who control Syria. Shia are the majority of the population only in Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iran and Iraq.

In most Muslim countries, the Sunni majority persecute or discriminate against the Shia minority. In Saudi Arabia, the leading Sunni country, Shia religious practices are suppressed and Shia citizens are discriminated against in education and employment.

The doctrinal dispute between Sunni and Shia has often resulted in violent conflict. The front line and heartland of that conflict is now Syria and Iraq, where charismatic and ruthless Islamic State (IS) leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is the self-appointed Sunni caliph.

It is against this background that we need to consider IS and the current conflict in the Middle East. On the Sunni side there are Saudi Arabia and the Arab states (other than Iraq), Turkey, IS, the various Syrian armed opposition groups, and the Palestinians. On the Shia side are Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanese Hezbollah.

Neither Sunni nor Shia has ever appreciated “Crusader” involvements in the Middle East – although Saudi Arabia has been pragmatic about letting the Christian United States fight its Muslim enemies. Christian crusades against Islam actually go back a long way, to 1095. The various US-led interventions since 1991 in Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria have been seen by many Muslims as a return to the bad old days of Crusader massacres of Muslims.

It was in large part because of IS's killing and enslavement of Christians (as well as the failure of the US-trained Iraqi Security Forces) that the US military went back into Iraq in August 2014, to be joined by Australian forces the following month. Neither the US's nor Australia's re-involvement to save Iraq was welcomed by Baghdad, but we pushed ourselves forward to counter IS on the coat-tails of our American allies who have little historical understanding of the Middle East, or of Islam in general.

IS certainly sees it as legitimate now to attack members of the US-led coalition on home soil for their unwelcome interference in the Middle East. IS's main priority though is consolidation of its caliphate in Syria

and Iraq and the establishment of *wilayats* (provinces) in Muslim countries (35 in 11 countries so far) in order to spread the reach of the central caliphate.

IS's main interest in Australian Muslims is in getting them to fight for the caliphate. Blocking Australian Muslims from going to fight in Syria is seen by some young Muslim Australians as Crusader interference in what they have been persuaded or groomed to believe is a sacred duty to defend their religion. Preventing them from going has created a major security headache for Australia.

IS regards the police as the front-line element in Western countries opposing IS and the caliphate, hence the various IS-inspired attempts over the past two years to attack the police and other IS enemies in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany and the US.

There are of course defence and intelligence benefits to be gained from being a trusty and unquestioning ally of the US, but they come at a significant cost to our foreign policy in terms of being taken seriously by other nations as an independent actor.

Much of the international community (and apparently the majority of Australians) feel that it puts us on the wrong side of the wall in the ongoing dispute between Israel and the Palestinians, and locks us unnecessarily into problematic relationships with countries like Russia and Iran. It also makes it near impossible for us to have a balanced strategic relationship with China.

Furthermore, it makes it more difficult for us to use constructive diplomacy to act as an honest broker in disputes like the one between India and Pakistan over Kashmir – which is the cause of a considerable amount of Islamist terrorism in South Asia.

Australia needs to go back to basics and consider how we might chart an independent path that respects traditional alliances but is more in *our* strategic interest. The US makes foreign policy on the run and does not think strategically about the long-term implications of its overseas involvements. It is also blinkered by its close security relationships with Israel and Saudi Arabia, and by its political hostility towards a range of countries.

In the current conflict in the Middle East, it would make more sense for Australia to be supporting the Shia and Alawites against the Sunni IS – but we are probably better off staying out of what is likely to be a protracted and deadly war between traditional Muslim enemies.

Australia's overseas military commitments in support of the US since 1991 have come at considerable cost to Australia, both socially and financially – as well as causing Islamist terrorism blowback effects in Australia – for very little tangible benefit in terms of positive international or security outcomes.

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²On 2 October 2015, a 15-year-old boy shot and killed an unarmed police civilian finance worker outside the New South Wales Police Force headquarters in Parramatta, a suburb of Sydney.