

Countering violent extremism in Australia

A paper based on a presentation to the Institute on 29 May 2018 by

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In response to Islamic State's call to its followers to export violence to Western countries, low technology, high impact, violent extremist events have been on the rise around the world and are hard to pre-empt and prevent. Australia has in place various programmes to counter violent extremism that stress early identification and intervention, disengagement from violence and deradicalisation from extremism, and the promotion of social cohesion and resilience. Dr Droogan describes this countering violent extremism (CVE) approach and its strengths and weaknesses. A study of a violent extremist incident in New South Wales found the society was highly resilient. It has led to a state focus in New South Wales on strengthening community partnerships to further enhance that resilience.

Key words: Australia; violent extremism; counter-terrorism; countering violent extremism; CVE.

As the self-described Islamic State (IS) lost its territories in Iraq and Syria between 2015 and 2018, it adopted a strategy of exporting terrorist attacks abroad, including to the West. A part of this strategy was the use of online platforms to radicalise its followers around the world and to mobilise them to commit violent acts in their own countries (Droogan and Peattie 2017). Its media spokesman, the late Abu Mohammad al-Adani, inspired many with exhortations like the following:

"If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling.

If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman or any of their allies. Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him.

If you are unable to do so, then burn his home, car, or business. Or destroy his crops. If you are unable to do so, then spit in his face."²

In this paper, I will briefly outline some of the steps taken in Australia to prevent and counter violent extremism, as well as recount some of the benefits and challenges of adopting the countering violent terrorism (CVE) approach.

Violent Extremism in Australia and Overseas

Partially in response to exhortations such as the one quoted above, low technology, high impact, violent extremist events have been on the rise around the world. The term 'violent extremist' is useful to apply to such attacks as it circumvents the slippery definitional issues of labelling violence as 'terrorist' – a term that is notoriously contingent depending on a person's political perspective or jurisdiction. Violent extremism can refer to violence conducted to further extreme ideological, religious or political aims, and can be applied equally to the Salafi Jihadism of IS or the hateful and intolerant violence of far-right neo-Nazis or far-left activist groups such as Antifa.

In Australia, in addition to perhaps a dozen foiled plots, there have been two successful IS-linked violent extremist events in Sydney. These include the Lindt Café hostage crisis of 15-16 December 2014 in which a self-radicalised lone gunman, Man Haron Monis, took 10 customers and eight employees hostage³; and the murder of an unarmed civilian employee outside the New South Wales Police Force headquarters in Parramatta on 2 October 2015, by Farhad Khalil Mohammad Jabar, a 15-year-old boy, who had older accomplices who had planned the attack and supplied the gun Jabar used.

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²Excerpt from a speech "In the name of Allah the Beneficent, the Merciful. Indeed, Your Lord is Ever Watchful" by Abu Mohammad al-Adnani on 22 September 2014 in which he exhorted supporters to kill non-Muslims in Western countries – see jihadwatch.org.

³Following a 16-hour siege, police entered the café and Monis and two hostages were killed.

Violent extremist events such as these are often not directly connected back to Islamic State through operational organisation, financing, or any direct call for religious permission (*fatwa*). Typically, they are carried out by young men – and they have been getting younger – who may show few signs of extremism or religious fanaticism. The spread of ideology through social media is a key factor, as is a connection between terrorism, crime and delinquency, even though direct exposure to IS propaganda is rarely if ever enough to solely radicalize an individual to violence. The relatively spontaneous and premeditated nature of such crimes, and their light digital footprint, makes them extraordinarily difficult for intelligence officials to pre-empt or prevent.

Countering Violent Extremism

Against this backdrop, as well as the parallel rise of politically-motivated violent extremism within the fringes of far-left and far-right groups, Australia now has a range of national and state programmes to prevent and counter violent extremism (Waldek and Droogan 2015). These are based on a multi-layered approach that focuses on three broad levels: general societal interventions (promoting social cohesion and societal resilience to acts of violence and hate); more focused interventions (identifying at-risk individuals in order to dissuade them from violence before they commit a crime); and the deradicalisation of proven violent extremists (for instance returnee IS foreign fighters). CVE programmes often consist of grants from federal and state governments to assist communities to prevent, counter and respond to violent extremism. New South Wales and Victoria have programmes to prevent prison radicalisation, disengage incarcerated violent extremists from a commitment to violence, and to support frontline Corrections staff. A national intervention framework focuses on diverting identified at-risk individuals from becoming violent extremists, and operates in all states and territories under the management of police forces.

All of this activity and funding raises the question of whether or not CVE programmes work. What is the proven best way to prevent or address acts of violent extremism and terrorism? Recent research looking at the history of how terrorism ends indicates that the two most common processes are either some form political compromise (43 per cent) or a combination of intelligence and policing (40 per cent); actual victory by the terrorists is uncommon (10 per cent), but even less common is the sole reliance on military intervention (7 per cent). Political compromise is only feasible in cases where the terrorist group is using violence in order to bargain their way into some form

of political recognition (older ‘traditional’ groups such as the Irish Republican Army or the Palestine Liberation Organisation offer good examples). However, global revolutionary groups such as IS and al-Qaeda generally do not desire a seat at any political table, but instead seek to destroy the table and everyone around it. This makes them effectively impossible to negotiate with.

In terms of the policing approach, the key appears to be to alienate the extremists from popular support and to cut off their source of recruits. For the extremists, organisational survival usually outranks political success as a goal. Threats to the organisation itself – through undermining their legitimacy and cutting off their access to recruits and supporters – tend to be more successful at stopping them than granting political demands. Degrading the organisation through applying policing, intelligence, social and political pressure is a proven successful strategy, as is cutting off access to recruits and the ability to radicalise individuals. Clearly, the application of overly heavy-handed intelligence and law enforcement that alienates and marginalises individuals or communities, turns them away from the government, or encourages sympathy for a terrorist’s cause, are counterproductive (Cronin 2009).

Hard and Soft Approaches

Approaches to counter terrorism are sometimes classified as either ‘hard’ or ‘soft’. Hard approaches can use either military or non-military means.

Hard counter-terrorism: Non-military hard approaches include economic sanctions; resource attacks; and clandestine and covert actions. Military approaches can involve a tactical response, including full-scale suppression campaigns (for instance the recent coalition against IS); hostage rescue missions; retaliation or reprisal; strategic pre-emption; or targeted killing. Continuing measures will involve policing and intelligence.

Soft counter-terrorism: Soft approaches can involve passive risk reduction; ‘political deterrence’; international diplomacy; conventional CVE and counter radicalisation; social reform; and – in cases – negotiation. So-called strategic approaches to counter-terrorism often encompass several objectives addressing different chronological stages in the occurrence of terrorism. These objectives can be broadly categorised as:

- preventing men and women from becoming terrorists;
- providing opportunities and support to individuals on a path to, or involved in, violent extremism to disengage;
- denying terrorism suspects the support, resources and means to organise themselves

- or to plan and carry out attacks;
- preparing for, and protecting against, terrorist attacks, in order to decrease the vulnerability of potential targets, in particular critical infrastructure;
- pursuing terrorist suspects to apprehend them and bring them to justice; and
- responding to terrorist attacks through proportionate measures to mitigate the impact of such attacks and to assist victims.

Australia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy

Australia's counter terrorism strategy is built upon a blend of hard and soft approaches. These include challenging violent extremist ideologies; stopping people from becoming terrorists; shaping the global environment; disrupting terrorist activity within Australia; and effective response and recovery (ANCTC 2017).

In terms of soft counter terrorism in Australia, a range of non-coercive tools and programmes have been developed by community organisations and government partners to prevent and counter violent extremism. They aim collectively to:

- **increase community cohesion** and trust by fostering interactions and networks among a range of communities, governments, police and social service providers;
- **dissuade individuals from using violence** by supporting non-violent forms of expression; and
- **re-integrate groups and individuals** who have become involved in violent extremism by facilitating their disengagement from the networks and behaviours that promote violence or criminal behaviour.

Assumptions of the CVE Approach

While CVE is a useful way to for a society like Australia to adopt a strategic 'whole of society' approach to preventing and mitigating the effects of violent extremism at home, this approach is not without its inherent drawbacks and contradictions. The CVE approach is ultimately based on the assumption that violent extremism is, at root, a social problem and that violent extremists will act rationally. This generic assumption can be teased out into a number of related assumptions, including:

- violent extremism is a **social problem** before it becomes a law enforcement or crime problem – *i.e.* if you can address the social or personal issue early you can prevent the crime from being carried out;
- violence a **strategic choice** made rationally by violent extremists – *i.e.* the violence is used to reach some sort of goal;

- if you remove the **grievances** for groups that use violence, they will cease to use it;
- if violence is an **ineffective** means to get results, violent extremists will cease to use it; and
- if **alternative options** (political or social) are provided for violent extremists to achieve their aims, they will use them.

Of course, such assumptions do not automatically apply in all situations. For example, rather than being a rational strategic choice, violence may be chosen for emotional or other irrational reasons – as may have been the case with Man Haron Monis. Where one or more of the assumptions does not apply, then use of the CVE approach in that situation can become problematic.

Problems with the CVE Approach

In addition to the possible assumption difficulties, there are other problems associated with effective implementation of the CVE approach.

The mechanisms that drive an individual towards violent extremism are not fully understood and can be highly idiosyncratic. Further, it is difficult to identify an 'at risk' individual, as 'radicalisation' (however understood) can occur very quickly and is hard to monitor. Indeed, there is little consensus regarding to what the term 'radicalisation' refers.

At the community level, there are further challenges. If the government nominates a community as being 'at risk', it can alienate and 'securitise' the very community with which they are trying to support and work. This can lead to blowback and cumulative extremism as members of that community feel further marginalised and targeted. The identification of the community also immediately implies that the community is primed to produce violent extremists or terrorists. Further, while the identification may link government interest in, and funding for, these communities to counter terrorism initiatives, it may ignore the actual concerns the community, its leaders and its young people have, such as youth alienation, bullying, domestic violence, petty criminality and the like.

Another issue is that CVE is difficult to evaluate effectively – broad societal approaches to CVE notoriously so – and has not been evaluated routinely in Australia in the past. This, however, is changing with recent CVE programmes, such as the NSW COMPACT initiative, containing a strong focus on the measurement and evaluation of how successfully community programmes have achieved their goals.

Finally, CVE can be politically contentious and necessitates strategic communication with the electorate – indeed, it is paramount – but it is

extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Communication goes two ways – to members of the so-called ‘at-risk’ communities, ensuring them that are not being targeted as threats to national security, and to the wider public who may wonder why government money is being spent to promote social programmes within minority communities. This is particularly difficult in a federation like Australia where state and federal approaches and messaging can be at variance, and at times diametrically opposed.

Case Study – New South Wales

Following the Lindt Café siege of 15-16 December 2014 described earlier, the New South Wales Government conducted a community and stakeholder consultation as well as a review of global best practice in CVE. The subsequent report⁴ stressed the importance of community partnerships when faced with such trauma; and found that fostering community resilience was important in preventing and addressing post-incident issues. The report recommended that New South Wales community partnerships should be fostered focusing on:

- awareness and education;
- youth empowerment and leadership;
- addressing frustration with global issues that may drive people to extremism; and
- active counter narratives that give marginalised youth outlets for their frustrations and passions in ways that are non-violent and non-criminal.

The report also found that the event had shown New South Wales to be a highly resilient society. Spontaneous community initiatives using social media to support the Muslim community, such as #illridewithyou, had really helped both the Muslim community and the wider community to work through and recover from the trauma. But it did lead to the Australian National Terrorism Plan 2002 (COAG 2002) being supplemented by a National CVE Intervention Framework in 2015⁵.

Conclusion

Islamic State may have lost most of its territory in the Middle East, but it is successfully inspiring individuals in the West who are sympathetic to its cause, many self-radicalised, to pursue its violent agenda where they live via whatever means are readily to hand. At the same time other forms of violent extremism have been on the rise in recent

years, including that associated with either far-right or far-left ideologies. As a consequence, Western countries have been experiencing incidents of violent extremism and Australia is no exception.

In Australia, we have in place a programme to counter violent extremism that stresses early intervention, disengagement with violence, and the promotion of social cohesion and resilience. The cornerstone of this programme is finding ways to successfully work with various communities to collectively and collaboratively address extremism and violence in all its forms. A case study of a violent extremist incident in New South Wales found that our society was already highly resilient and, in conjunction with the countering violent extremism programme, the focus is now on strengthening community partnerships to further enhance that societal resilience.

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