

Spies pulled out of Asia to fight ISIS, The Aus, 30 July 2016, p 1, PAUL MALEY CAMERON STEWART

Australia's foreign espionage agency has stripped officers from across its Southeast Asian and central Asian stations, sending spies to the Middle East in an urgent bid to meet the growing threat posed by Islamic State.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has described for the first time how the Australian Secret Intelligence Service retooled in the wake of Islamic State's success in Iraq and Syria, forging new partnerships with overseas intelligence services and reopening stations. The 2014 invasion of Iraq, where Islamic State annex large tracts of northern Iraq and declared a Muslim "caliphate", prompted one of the greatest upheavals in Australia's intelligence community since the Cold War.

Having lowered its presence across the Middle East following the cooling of the Iraq and Afghan wars, ASIS had to pivot quickly and sharply back towards the region.

ASIS, which had been tasked mainly with spying on peoplesmugglers, took officers from stations up the people-smuggling chain in Southeast and central Asia, and redeployed them.

It also brokered new relationships with foreign intelligence services with which it had not previously dealt in its quest to learn more about Australians travelling to Syria to fight for Islamic State, also known as ISIS.

Ms Bishop described the talks she had with ASIS as the Syrian crisis was unfolding in 2013-14.

"We would consider where our intelligence needed to be directed and we would discuss that with our agencies," Ms Bishop told The Weekend Australian.

"They would seek our approval to commence discussions or enhance discussions with these intelligence organisations for the purpose of gathering more information about Australians who may be travelling."

Among the most forthcoming was Jordan, which has become a hub for Western spies, including ASIS operatives, since the Syrian civil war began. Contrary to the popular image, most spies work as declared officers, meaning their identity and purpose is known to the host country.

Such officers need the permission of the host country to operate, meaning bolstering their numbers is not always quick or straightforward.

Until the people-smuggling trade stopped in 2013-14, ASIS was largely occupied with gathering information of smuggling targets in Southeast Asia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the subcontinent.

When the trade ended, ASIS was free to pull officers from its Southeast Asian and central Asian stations and send them to the Middle East.

It reopened its Iraq station, which it reportedly shut in July 2010, as part of a larger downsizing of its operations across the Middle East.

It also sent several declared officers into Jordan.

Ms Bishop said the spy service also struck up relationships with new partners.

"That is what ASIS does, it makes connections with groups and agencies that would not otherwise be seen as being in Australia's national interest," Ms Bishop said.

"They were making contact with intelligence agencies that we would not otherwise have seen a need to contact, but because of the foreign fighter threat, we felt that it was in our national interest for these connections to be made."

The Weekend Australian understands the spy service performed a similar "surge" after the 2014 downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, which was shot down over the Ukraine by Russian-backed rebels.

In the wake of the attack, which claimed 38 Australian lives, it was widely reported that then prime minister Tony Abbott canvassed sending Australian troops on to the crash site, situated as it was in a war zone, to secure the area.

But it seems the tragedy also made heavy demands on Australia's spy service, which had to pull staff from other stations and redeploy them to gather intelligence about the sort of situation Australian officials could expect to find.

ASIS's ability to expand into the Middle East was further helped by Mr Abbott's decision in August 2014 to lift spending across all spy agencies by \$630 million in the face of the growing Islamic State threat.

Ms Bishop brokered the key agreement to lift the ASIS presence in Jordan during a series of meetings with King Abdullah II in 2014.

That agreement gave the Australian spy agency a window into Syria that it did not previously have, and gave Australia a chance to better monitor those Australians seeking to travel to or return from Syria as foreign fighters.