



**Australian Government**  
**Australian Security**  
**Intelligence Organisation**

# ASIO submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security

**Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia**

16 February 2021



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## ASIO's role

1. ASIO protects Australia and Australians from threats to their security.
2. Under the *Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Act 1979* (ASIO Act), ASIO is required to identify, investigate, and provide advice to prevent acts of politically motivated violence.
  - a. ASIO investigates extremism to identify the threat before an act of violence occurs.
  - b. ASIO works with law enforcement agencies to prevent extremism and acts of terrorism.

## Threat of terrorism in Australia

3. The national terrorism threat level remains at **PROBABLE**. That is, credible intelligence indicates individuals and groups have an intention and capability to conduct a terrorist attack in Australia.
4. A range of factors influence the threat of terrorism in Australia, including offshore terrorist groups, extremist exploitation of technology, and propaganda designed to radicalise, recruit and inspire attacks.
  - a. While the COVID-19 pandemic has changed Australia's security environment, it has not substantially diminished the threat from terrorism.
  - b. The threat posed by Sunni Islamic extremism remains a significant and enduring concern, and the threat from right-wing extremism has also increased in recent years.
  - c. Readily available weapons and simple tactics will remain the more likely features of a terrorist attack in Australia.
  - d. Terrorist propaganda continues to resonate with extremists in Australia, and such messaging is drawing a younger audience. Australians as young as 13 and 14 are involved in onshore terrorism, both in Islamic extremist and extreme right-wing circles.
  - e. Terrorists continue to use the internet to radicalise people and provide how-to advice on attacks, and to exploit technology to facilitate their activities.
  - f. Extremists' increased use of anonymous and secure communications platforms poses challenges to intelligence and law enforcement monitoring.
  - g. A number of terrorism offenders are scheduled for release from Australian prisons over the next five years. The enduring power of extremist ideologies means some may re-engage in extremist activities.
  - h. It is also possible some Australian citizens currently in the Syria and Iraq conflict zones will seek to return to Australia.
5. Since September 2014 there have been nine attacks and 19 major counter-terrorism disruptions in response to potential or imminent attack planning in Australia. Of the 19 major disruptions, 17 related to Islamic terrorism and two related to right-wing extremism.

## Islamic extremism

6. Islamic extremism is the support for violence to achieve a specific social, political, religious and legal system based on an extreme interpretation of Islam.
7. The Islamic extremist threat in Australia continues to be shaped by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and, to a lesser extent, al-Qa'ida.
8. Islamic extremists continue to disseminate propaganda designed to radicalise, recruit, instruct on and inspire terrorist attacks, including in Australia.
9. Al-Qa'ida remains active, particularly offshore; and in the next five years Australian prisons are due to release a number of Islamic extremist prisoners whose actions were inspired by al-Qa'ida.

## Right-wing extremism

10. Right-wing extremism is the support for violence to achieve political outcomes relating to ideologies, including but not limited to, white supremacism and Neo-Nazism.
11. The extreme right-wing has been in ASIO's sights for many decades.
12. Extreme right-wing groups are more organised, sophisticated and security conscious than before.
13. The threat from extreme right-wing groups and individuals in Australia has increased, and ASIO continues to see more people drawn to and adopting extreme right-wing ideologies. The 2019 Christchurch attack continues to be drawn on for inspiration by right-wing extremists, both in Australia and internationally.
14. Overall Islamic extremism still comprises most of ASIO's counter-terrorism workload. However, the threat from the extreme right-wing has grown. In 2020:
  - a. a right-wing extremist charged under Commonwealth terrorism laws in 2016 was found guilty of terrorism offences including 'acts in preparation for, or planning a terrorist act';
  - b. for the first time, a right-wing extremist was prevented from travelling offshore to fight on a foreign battlefield, due to a passport cancellation based on an ASIO adverse security assessment; and
  - c. Australia's second terrorism threat relating to individuals with an extreme right-wing ideology was disrupted.
15. ASIO remains concerned with the threat posed by small groups or lone actors inspired to conduct an attack. These threats are difficult to detect, and can emerge with little forewarning.

## Left-wing extremism

16. Left-wing extremism is the support for violence to achieve political outcomes relating to ideologies, including but not limited to, anarchism, for example.
17. Left-wing extremism is not currently prominent in Australia, although there are several overseas groups who attract individuals adhering to an extreme left-wing ideology.

## Impact of COVID-19

18. The COVID-19 pandemic has been used by Islamic and right-wing extremists, and issue-motivated groups to promote their views. They are seeking to exploit social and economic dislocation; and their extremist ideology has been spreading more quickly and widely as Australians spend more time online engaging with like-minded individuals.
  - a. An unprecedented home-based audience pushed online by COVID-19 may increase exposure to extremist propaganda.
  - b. COVID-19 has given issue-motivated groups and individuals the chance to share new conspiracy theories, and reinforce existing ones (see *Issue Motivated Groups* below).
  - c. For example, extreme right-wing groups and individuals have seized on COVID-19, believing it reinforces the narratives and conspiracies at the core of their ideologies. They see the pandemic as proof of the failure of globalisation, multiculturalism, and democracy, and confirmation that societal collapse and a ‘race war’ are inevitable.

## Challenges of the online environment

19. The online environment enables unrestricted access to online propaganda, instructional material and extremist discussion—which potentially strengthens intent and builds capability to undertake terrorist attacks.
  - a. Extremists’ use of anonymous and secure communications platforms also poses challenges to intelligence and law enforcement monitoring.
  - b. Many encrypted-by-default messaging applications allow subjects of investigation to communicate securely, whether intentionally or not.
  - c. Encrypted communications damage intelligence coverage in nine out of 10 priority counter terrorism cases.

## Terrorist propaganda

20. Islamic extremists overseas continue to produce and disseminate propaganda encouraging attacks in the West—including Australia—which is constantly updated to reflect current events and tailored to inspire or direct their actions.
  - a. In late October 2020, propaganda was published by ISIL supporters and official al-Qa’ida leadership praising the October beheading attacks in France. The propaganda encouraged followers to continue attacks against the West.

21. Australia continues to be specifically mentioned in pro-ISIL propaganda, and these releases add to a large body of material that encourages terrorism.
  - a. This propaganda is drawing a younger audience which accesses this material online, and its potential reach increased in 2020 as COVID-19 social isolation increasingly pushed Australians online.
22. Some extreme right-wing propaganda used by groups here and overseas is disseminated by posters, stickers and banners; however, online distribution provides propaganda with its most significant reach. Propaganda has multiple purposes: to intimidate sections of the community, to provoke media attention and to appeal to new recruits.

### Weapons and tactics

23. The most likely form of terrorism in Australia remains an attack aimed at ‘soft’ targets—such as people in crowded places—using readily available weapons and simple tactics. But some extremists, including in Australia, aspire to conduct complex and spectacular attacks.
24. Individuals or small groups could mount a low-capability attack in Australia with little or no forewarning; an attack of this nature requires minimal preparation and presents significant investigative challenges to security and law enforcement agencies.
  - a. The nine terrorist attacks targeting people in Australia since 2014 were all perpetrated by lone actors: six using edged weapons and three using firearms.
25. While we are concerned about the actions of lone actors and small groups, a large-scale coordinated terrorist attack in Australia cannot be ruled out. The major terrorist plots disrupted in December 2016 and July 2017 both involved groups with aspirations to conduct a larger scale attack.
  - a. Some Australian extremists will continue to aspire to conduct terrorist attacks here.
  - b. Terrorists will continue to evolve and adapt attack plans and methodology to defeat protective security measures.
  - c. Transnational terrorist groups will continue to focus on operations against the West, including by inciting domestic supporters to conduct attacks in their homelands.

### Issue-motivated groups

26. COVID-19 has exacerbated a range of anti-government, anti-5G, anti-vaccination and pro-conspiracy narratives raising public awareness of different issue motivated groups (IMGs).
  - a. IMGs encompass a range of highly personalised beliefs that drive people to respond—typically in protest—to a given cause, event or development and can unite either temporarily or long-term.
  - b. ASIO becomes involved only where IMGs support or seek to use violence for a political outcome.

## An evolving threat environment

27. As part of our role to protect Australia and Australians from threats to security, ASIO is actively monitoring developments in the threat environment. Given the evolving nature of these threats, the Committee's inquiry provides a useful opportunity to review Australia's existing counter-terrorism legislation, policy settings, and response options.