

SENATE LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS  
ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES 9 FEBRUARY 2016  
OPENING STATEMENT

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- The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation last appeared before this Committee in May 2015 and much has happened since.
- Terrorism continues to be the most obvious and immediate challenge for my organisation.
- The broader security environment remains challenging, in respect to international conflict, terrorist activities (both onshore and offshore).
- With that in mind, I would like to provide you with an update on the security outlook.
- I would remind you that **The National Terrorism Threat Advisory System (NTTAS)** was launched on 26 November 2015 to inform the public about the likelihood of a terrorist attack in Australia.
- This system better reflects the current security environment. It replaced a system that was designed over 10 years ago, and for a time when the security threats we faced were more benign.
- The old system did not provide the degree of precision at the higher end of the threat scale now necessary to inform the public about the nature of the terrorist threat.
- Under this new system, the national terrorism threat level for Australia is PROBABLE, which is – ‘credible intelligence, assessed to represent a plausible scenario, indicates an intention and capability to conduct an attack in Australia’.
- While we have changed the way we describe the threat, the threat itself has not changed.
- The factors that underpinned the threat assessment when ASIO raised the national terrorism threat level on 12 September 2014 have not changed.

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- Since that date, there have been **3 attacks and 6 major counter-terrorism disruption operations** in response to imminent attack planning by Australians.
- Each of the **6 major** disrupted terrorist plots was initially identified and investigated by ASIO, prior to being handed over to law enforcement partners.
- In addition, close cooperation with law enforcement has led to a series of targeted disruptions and other activities to contain terrorism threats.
- The conflict in Syria and Iraq continues to resonate in Australia.
- There remains a small number of Australians influenced by the twisted rhetoric espoused by groups such as ISIL.
- To provide a snapshot—and noting that these figures are regularly changing—there are approximately **110 Australians** currently fighting or engaged with terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq.
- While a minor decrease was noted in this figure last year, this does not represent an overall decrease in the interest shown by individuals to travel to join the conflict.
- At least **45 Australians** are confirmed killed in the conflict—and it could be anywhere **up to 49**.
- Untrained, naive young Australians are being drawn into this conflict are finding themselves in highly expendable, highly dangerous positions of low importance amid the ISIL effort.
- About **190 people in Australia** are actively supporting extremist groups in Syria and Iraq through recruiting, fundraising and in many cases seeking to travel to join these groups.
- About **40 Australians** have returned from the Syria and Iraq conflicts.
- In concert with other Australian agencies, ASIO is working to identify the issues each of these individuals might present.
- We are actively working to ensure each is managed effectively and according to our laws.
- Counter-terrorism investigations remain a priority for ASIO.

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- While foreign fighters and the conflict in Syria and Iraq remain significant focus of this effort, our counter terrorism investigations are conducted in relation to a range of potential threats of politically motivated violence.
  - The exact number of high-interest counter terrorism investigations ASIO has underway at any point in time fluctuates as some investigations are closed and new ones identified.
  - The level of priority given to any particular investigation can change markedly with new intelligence.
  - It is true to say, the past eighteen months has been a period of heightened tempo, with more active counter-terrorism investigations underway than at any time in the preceding decade.
- To date, ASIO has issued adverse security assessments recommending the cancellation or refusal of **158 passports** for Australians linked to extremist groups involved in the conflict in Syria and Iraq.
- ASIO remains committed to preventing travel by would-be fighters as the best outcome for the Australian community and our security needs.
- As recent as two weeks ago, ASIO was involved in coordinated searches of premises associated with individuals of security interest.
- Internationally, we have seen numerous terrorist attacks on soft targets. Jihadists undertook multiple attacks across Paris under the banner of ISIL on 13 November 2015—these attacks killed 130 innocent people.
- Jakarta was targeted on 14 January this year, resulting in the deaths of at least 8 people—4 of those were the attackers. ISIL also claimed responsibility for this attack.

### Assessments

- The Syria and Iraq conflicts have (and continue to) generated significant humanitarian concerns.
- The increase in refugees fleeing the region continues to widely reported on by international media—and the Australian Government has committed to twelve thousand of Syrian refugees.

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- As per ASIO's responsibilities—we will progress the security assessments of this group in-line with our established risk-managed, intelligence-led processes.

### **Espionage**

- With such a strong emphasis on counter-terrorism, we must be careful not to overlook the espionage threat.
- I'm sure the Committee will appreciate, ASIO does not generally provide detail about the enduring espionage threat due to a range of sensitivities.
- It is important to be clear, that this lack of exposure does not mean the espionage threat to Australia and our interests is any less significant.
- What I can say, is that espionage is an insidious threat that continues to pose a challenge.
- The perpetrators are utilising a range of tradecraft and capabilities to target strategically important Australian interests.
- ASIO is and will continue working closely across government and industry to ensure we remain alert to this threat—and that we have the infrastructure and systems to combat it.
- I welcome questions from the Committee.