

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
AUSTRALIAN SECURITY INTELLIGENCE ORGANISATION

Question No. AE16/077

Senator Collins asked the following question at the hearing on 9 February 2016:

1. How important is it for senior office holders of the Australian Government [i.e. ministers and senior public servants] to comply with security protocols when they are dealing with sensitive or secret information across electronic communications such as telephone and email? Is espionage a real risk?
2. To the extent you are able to provide them, what are the basic protocols for the communication of sensitive or secret materials across electronic networks?
3. What risk would arise from communication of secret information across non-secure networks, in breach of established security protocols?
4. How important are programs to counter violent extremism in the fight against terrorism here in Australia?
5. How successful would you say these programs have been in achieving their objectives?
6. Approximately how many Australians are currently participating with terrorist organisation in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq?
7. (a) How many Australian have travelled to the Middle East to participate with terrorist organisations in the last 12 months?
(b) Is that figure higher than in the previous 12 months? What is the trajectory of numbers of Australians going to join terrorist organisation overseas?
8. Approximately how many Australians have returned from fighting with terrorist organisation in Iraq and Syria?
9. Approximately how many Australians have been killed fighting with terrorist organisation in Iraq and Syria?

The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

1. ASIO refers to the response provided by the Director-General of Security, Mr Duncan Lewis, to the Senator's question at the Additional Estimates hearing on 9 February 2016:

There is no question. It is not just senior office holders; it is the Australian community at large. We were talking about social media, but in this day of electronic connectivity, where we are obviously operating on electronic systems, you have an increasing number of pieces of official information that are on electronic databases around the place that can be retrieved through cyberespionage or other forms of espionage. So it is something which we as a community need to be alive to.

ASIO has nothing further to add to that response.

2. ASIO refers to the response provided to the Senator's question at the Additional Estimates hearing on 9 February 2016. The Protective Security Policy Framework, administered by the Attorney-General's Department, details requirements to safeguard official information and is available at <https://www.protectivesecurity.gov.au/informationsecurity>. The Australian Signals Directorate provides advice on ICT security, through the Information Security Manual, for Australian government systems.

3. ASIO refers to the response provided to the Senator's question at the Additional Estimates hearing on 9 February 2016. ASIO directs the Senator's question to the Australian Signals Directorate which provides advice on ICT security for Australian government systems.
4. Countering violent extremism programs are important to help identify and reach out to individuals at the earliest possible stages who are already radicalising to violence. The Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Centre within the Attorney-General's Department is responsible for national coordination of CVE policies and programs.
5. Australia's approach to its CVE programs has been informed by international research and evaluation of CVE programs which show that the best way to build resilience to radicalisation and to assist in preventing Australians from being willing to support or participate in overseas conflicts is through well-informed and equipped families, communities and local institutions. A review undertaken in 2014 identified that our CVE programs had facilitated important and effective relationships between governments and communities. The evaluation also identified a need for programs more targeted to address the implications of overseas conflicts in Syria and Iraq, including an increasing number of individuals radicalising to violence.

New programs were established in 2014 and although these programs are still in the early stages of implementation and are designed to affect long term social change, early indicators are demonstrating that the programs are working. We will continue to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of our CVE programs.

6. As of the end of February 2016, around 110 Australians were currently fighting or engaged with terrorist groups in Syria or Iraq.
7. (a) As of the end of February 2016, ASIO identified that during the past 12 months approximately 50 additional Australians have travelled to Syria or Iraq to participate in the conflict.

This reflects a comparison made in February 2016 with figures from February 2015, at which time ASIO was investigating around 90 Australians who were currently fighting or engaged with terrorist groups in Syria or Iraq and around 30 returnees from the conflict, while assessing at least 24, and possibly as many as 29, Australians had been killed as a result of their involvement in the conflict.

(b) The declaration of the caliphate in mid-2014 initiated a significant increase in the number of Australians travelling to the conflict zone. However, the upward trajectory has largely plateaued since mid-2015.

8. Around 40 people have returned to Australia after travelling to Syria/Iraq and joining armed groups fighting in the conflict there.
 - Some are assessed as returnees of security significance (individuals known to have reached the theatre and have been active with Islamist extremist groups).
 - Some travelled to Syria/Iraq in support of Islamist extremist groups, but were not fighting for them or providing significant support. This includes many who travelled as family members of fighters.
 - Some travelled to fight with anti-ISIL groups.

9. As at 4 March 2016, at least 45, and possibly as many as 51, Australians are believed to have been killed as a result of their involvement in the conflict.