

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

Question No. SBE15/109

Senator Xenophon asked the written question at the hearing on 20 October 2015:

I refer to comments made by Duncan Lewis, ASIO director-general in a recent news article from the Australian regarding two common misperceptions about the organisation's role. Mr Lewis is quoted as saying: "ASIO is often incorrectly seen as a purely domestic security intelligence agency when in fact it is responsible for the security of Australians wherever they are, which obviously includes overseas". The article states that as more and more Australians travel and live overseas (more than one million) – ASIO's international footprint has increased correspondingly with officer's posted throughout Asia, North America, the Middle East and Europe.

1. What roles and responsibilities does ASIO and its officers hold when operating overseas?
2. When did ASIO initially start posting officers overseas?
3. Can you advise the current number of ASIO officers posted overseas?
4. How much has ASIO's international footprint increased? Can you provide a breakdown of these numbers over the last decade?
5. Is ASIO still expanding its offshore role?

In the news article, it is stated that ASIO requires staff to have well-developed operational and analytical skills.

6. What training (operational and otherwise) do ASIO staff receive prior to and during overseas postings?
7. What authorisations exist overseas for weapons carrying by officers?
8. How does ASIO monitor weapon handling by overseas officers and what policies exist to ensure safety to officers and others?

I refer to the IGIS inquiry into an incident overseas in which a Special Forces soldier allegedly pulled a gun on a female ASIS agent during a drinking session.

9. What policies does ASIO have in place with regards to ensuring ASIO has controls in place to ensure that officers are not carrying weapons under the influence of alcohol?
10. How does ASIO cooperate and interact with other Australian agencies operating overseas (ie. ASIS, Special Forces)?

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

1. ASIO engages liaison relationships with a number of international partners in support of its responsibility for protecting Australians and Australian interests from the threats to security whether in Australia or overseas.
For reasons of security and capability protection, ASIO does not provide specific details about the nature of engagement with foreign partners.
2. The first ASIO staff were posted overseas shortly after the end of the Second World War. Their primary role was to assist with the security aspects of visa processing of displaced people migrating to Australia.
3. For reasons of operational security and capability protection, ASIO does not provide specific details about the number of ASIO officers posted overseas.

4. ASIO engages with, and receives support from, a number of international partners. While international partnerships have always been important in the performance of ASIO's functions, the complexity of the 'foreign fighters' issue has made cooperation with foreign security and intelligence agencies even more critical. As a consequence, ASIO has expanded its overseas liaison network. For security and capability protection reasons ASIO does not disclose detail.
5. ASIO's role, both in Australia and overseas, is clearly defined by legislation.
6. Selection of intelligence officers for overseas postings is a merit based process, consistent with other Government agencies that deploy officers overseas. Successful candidates receive a series of briefings specific to the post to which they will be deployed. ASIO continually reviews and develops its training and protective security measures in respect to threats posed to ASIO staff and premises.
7. ASIO officers are not permitted to carry weapons.
8. Please refer to Question 7.
9. Please refer to Question 7.
10. ASIO works closely with other Australian agencies overseas in order to ensure high quality security and intelligence outcomes for the Australian government. The nature and degree of cooperation is dependent upon the particular circumstances. For operational reasons, ASIO does not go into detail.