



Securing Australia

Insights in counter-terrorism

Views from *The Strategist*

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Views from *The Strategist*



NEW SOUTH WALES
POLICE

EDITED BY
JOHN COYNE AND
FRANCESCA CIUFFETELLI



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Contents

	Foreword	5
	Justin Bassi	
	Twenty-five years on: lessons and challenges from a long war	7
	John Coyne	
	Victory over terror?: Australia’s ‘War on Terror’ at home and abroad, 2001 to 2026	10
	Chris Taylor	
1	Threats and Radicalisation	14
	As antisemitism strains Australian social cohesion, the government must step forward	
	John Coyne	
	Stopping anti-Semitic terrorism in Australia	16
	Michael Pezzullo	
2	Government leadership, policy and legislation	20
	Australia’s new CT and CVE strategy: light on policy and specifics	
	Henry Campbell	
	A political fix in hate-crime and terror legislation shows the government isn’t leading	22
	Henry Campbell	
	Why Australia’s terrorism definition still works	23
	John Coyne, Chris Taylor and Susan Thompson	
	When politics turns deadly: the case for a national resilience campaign	25
	Justin Bassi and James Corera	
	Think you know terrorism when you see it? A new inquiry says think again	26
	Susan Thomson	
	Expelling the ambassador—and protecting society with less than criminal-court proof	28
	John Coyne and James Corera	
	State-sponsored antisemitism on Australian soil: why Australia’s response matters	29
	Justin Bassi and James Corera	
3	Australia’s domestic landscape	31
	Australia’s security architecture must evolve, not regress	
	Justin Bassi	
	Australia’s quiet counterterrorism wins are being missed. That’s a problem	33
	John Coyne, Henry Campbell and Justin Bassi	
	Reuniting ASIO and the AFP under Home Affairs is the right move to address intensifying threats	35
	James Corera and John Coyne	

A Bondi royal commission would let the intelligence community speak, and expose some polite fictions	36
Chris Taylor	
After Bondi, we crave certainty—but quick fixes are dangerous	38
John Coyne	
Bondi terror: don't scapegoat the people who keep us safe	40
John Coyne	
Bondi terror: when we ask the wrong questions after violence	41
James Corera and John Coyne	
Bondi terror: we'll need a wide-ranging royal commission	43
Chris Taylor	
Bondi terror: attack reinforces the need for security frameworks that manage risk	44
John Coyne and James Corera	
Bondi terror: sometimes we just need to pause and reflect	46
David Wroe	
Bondi terror: our response must be unity, not division and distrust	47
John Coyne	
4 International terrorism	49
Australia must stop overlooking misogynistic youth extremism	
Astrid Young	
Indonesia has cut funding for counterterrorism programs. Australia should step in	51
Darul Mahdi	
India and Pakistan must manage escalation after Pahalgam attack	52
Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan	
Delhi terror attack heightens India-Pakistan tension	53
Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan	
Four years later, Afghanistan struggles for its voice	55
Wahidullah Waissi	
About the authors	57

Foreword

Justin Bassi

Executive Director, ASPI

Security is not a settled state nor about always guaranteeing stability. It is about reassurance and trust amid instability and threat, and it is maintained with a shared acceptance that risk can be managed but not eliminated.

2026 marks 25 years since the September 11 attacks. It was a moment that redefined terrorism as a persistent challenge, prompted creation of new counter-terrorism architecture and, by drawing resources and attention, would provide space for the rise of authoritarianism.

In that time, the liberal-democratic world has several times tried to call ‘mission accomplished’ on terrorism and fleetingly prioritised other threats. And then it’s been surprised by terrorist evolution, as when ISIS burst onto the scene in 2013 and when Hamas attacked Israel in 2023.

The evidence suggests democracies are at their best when tackling an agreed single threat. That’s why they struggled to simultaneously counter Islamist terrorism and constrain China’s malicious rise, and they couldn’t easily manage the global financial crisis without becoming vulnerable to Moscow and Beijing. Too often in these 25 years, we have been able to address strategic threats, such as China, only when thinking terrorism is defeated or degraded.

But the reality is that terrorism has never been defeated; it has evolved and adapted. As must we. Transparency with the public means being clear that there is no longer a top security threat; there are multiple, simultaneous and cascading threats, and we cannot afford to (again) put more resources on counterterrorism by shifting those we apply to China.

For Australia, the December 2025 Bondi Beach terror attack signalled not the return of terrorism but its persistence. More importantly, the attack exposed how poorly understood that persistence had become. In the aftermath, public debate frequently treated the attack as a system failure rather than as evidence of a system operating in a permanently uncertain environment. The national terrorism threat level of ‘Probable’ was discussed

as if it were a temporary alert, rather than a description of enduring risk. A mechanism designed to provide clarity was not preventing mixed messages.

That misunderstanding matters. It leads to unattainable expectations of police and intelligence agencies. Much of the public unreasonably expects these institutions to identify intent before it fully forms, intervene before violence occurs and do so within strict legal and ethical boundaries, every time. Adversaries, by contrast, require only a single success. After an attack, fragments align and warning signs appear obvious. Beforehand, intelligence is partial, ambiguous and contested. Prevention is judged in hindsight; decision-making happens without it.

Governments, too, face intense pressure to act decisively in the wake of trauma. Following Bondi, the federal and New South Wales governments moved quickly to strengthen firearms and hate-crime laws. Their response reflected the seriousness of the moment and a responsibility to restore confidence. But urgency can narrow perspective. Law cannot substitute for judgment, nor can it resolve challenges that are social, behavioural and informational even more than they are criminal. We require not only law and order but social order, driven by a culture that reflects Australian values—in which the question is not which freedoms need to be restricted for security but rather what security is needed to protect our freedoms.

More than 25 years of counterterrorism experience has shown that our societal culture must be nurtured regardless of our laws, which all eventually become outdated and require updating. Recovery from terror attacks comes from the social cohesion and national resilience that existed the day before the crisis. We don’t need hindsight to assess that, before Bondi, the resilience and cohesion of Australia and indeed most of the democratic world had weakened dangerously.

The ‘Probable’ terror threat level that applied before the Bondi attack meant a terrorist incident was more than 50 percent likely. But that terror threat level is distinct from our national resilience and social cohesion. It is vital to understand that the terror threat level had been ‘Probable’ almost continuously since 2014. At the same time, our level

of social cohesion meant that our resilience to crises and ability to work together to recover was strong. It is why we effectively need two ratings, one for the terror threat and one for national resilience.

We have a societal problem well beyond the terror threat level and one that involves heightened strain on democratic practice: how disagreement is expressed, how authority is challenged, and how far tolerance extends before it undermines the conditions that make tolerance possible. Australia, like other nations, has tolerated the intolerable and accepted the unacceptable. If Bondi can result in an arrest of this decline of social cohesion, then from this tragedy we can become stronger.

The decline did not emerge from a single event. It's been a product of long-term trends, in particular falling public trust in institutions, accelerated by online technology. There is no short-term magic solution.

While security should be about protecting freedoms, not sacrificing them, such secure freedom does come at an ongoing monetary cost. This is why the public needs elected leaders to be transparent about the threats, the consequences of inaction and the requirements to maintain a cohesive society even in an unstable world.

Institutional roles must be clear. Security agencies are not arbiters of belief, nor should they be drawn into regulating lawful thought or expression, however offensive. Respectful disagreement should be seen as part of the solution, not censored. In his foundational essay, 'On Liberty', John Stuart Mill wrote that 'unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable.'

Yet democracies cannot afford to ignore the environments in which intimidation and aggression are normalised and amplified. When left unaddressed, these environments lower the threshold at which violence becomes thinkable.

The challenge at this 25-year mark is therefore not simply one of capability, powers or funding, though all matter, but of democratic discipline. It requires leaders willing to resist absolutism, institutions prepared to explain limits rather than promise certainty, and citizens willing to live with disagreement without resorting to coercion or silence.

This volume is offered as both a reflection and a guide: a consideration of what the past quarter-century of counterterrorism has taught Australia and what the

post-Bondi moment demands of us now. It reflects respect for the professionals across law enforcement, intelligence, policy, law, academia and communities who operate daily in an imperfect system confronting an adaptive threat. It involves authors who have had experience in the counterterrorism and security fields for much of these 25 years, including across intelligence, law enforcement and policy. Some authors are experts who directly responded to the rise of al Qaeda and ISIS, including in the development and implementation of counterterrorism policies and laws.

The purpose of the volume is to engage seriously with complexity, to interrogate assumptions, expose trade-offs and encourage a more mature national conversation about risk, resilience and responsibility.

Australia's strategic environment is more complex than ever. Navigating it will depend less on finding perfect answers than on sustaining the institutions, norms and habits of judgment that allow a democratic society to not simply balance security and freedom but be securely free.

Twenty-five years on: lessons and challenges from a long war

John Coyne

I still remember the morning of 11 September 2001. The call came from a watch office: urgent and uncertain. ‘Turn on the television!’ As the second plane struck, the shock gave way to something colder: the professional instinct that someone would have to pay. None of us yet grasped that the world, and the work we would do in it, had just changed forever.

For me, that morning didn’t mark a beginning so much as a turning point. Counterterrorism (CT) wasn’t new to Australia. Before 9/11, our national focus was on right-wing extremist groups seeking access to defence personnel and weapons, on a worrying trend of militia culture, and on protecting our institutions from infiltration. Yet the attacks on New York and Washington DC propelled us into a new era—one that redefined the boundaries of national security, intelligence cooperation and moral endurance.

From Canberra to Jakarta, from the villages of Bangsamoro to the streets of Karachi, I’ve seen how the global War on Terror reshaped not just institutions but people. It demanded that we learn fast, collaborate deeply and adapt constantly. A quarter-century later, the world is no less dangerous. Terrorism endures, changed in form and velocity. It sits within a wider ecosystem of disinformation, extremism and geopolitical rivalry. The task now isn’t simply to remember what the war taught us, but to relearn how to apply those lessons in a world where the threats are more ambiguous and public trust is more fragile.

The following isn’t a definitive list of lessons, but a collection of thoughts from over 25 years of work.

The first lesson was about partnership. Success in CT begins with partnership, not power. In 2002, in the smoking aftermath of the Bali bombings, the Australian Federal Police and the Indonesian National Police built one of the most effective CT partnerships anywhere in the world. I witnessed it firsthand in Jakarta and Semarang; Australians and Indonesians standing together at blast sites, mapping the networks of Jemaah Islamiyah,

transforming grief into cooperation. We discovered that trust can’t be built through lectures or aid projects. It emerges from shared danger, shared purpose, and shared success, as well as, oddly enough, through singing karaoke. That partnership became the regional benchmark for what collaborative CT should look like. It taught us that security exported by diktat fails, but security co-designed in hardship endures.

The second lesson was that intelligence without integration is just noise. In the early 2000s, every government built a ‘fusion centre’. We soon learned that linking databases wasn’t the same as linking minds. Over those early years, I often saw how fragmented intelligence cultures missed the obvious because no one owned the whole picture. Australia’s innovation was the creation of genuinely integrated intelligence teams that combined federal, state and foreign insights into a single operational frame. But integration isn’t a reform; it’s a discipline. It must be renewed continuously. In an era when threats blend ideology, criminality and statecraft, the fusion habit is our most powerful defence. Lose it, and we risk repeating the mistakes of the pre-9/11 world: the right dots connected, but too late.

As the campaign against global terrorism deepened, a third realisation emerged—that CT had become almost everything. What was once called ‘counterinsurgency’ quickly became relabelled as CT. In Iraq and Afghanistan, stabilisation missions, tribal engagement programs, intelligence collection and kinetic strikes all merged under that single banner. We were no longer just chasing terrorists; we were trying to remake societies through the lens of CT doctrine. In hindsight, it wasn’t an unusual occurrence, historically. The British had done the same in Northern Ireland, where a blend of policing, intelligence and military operations blurred the distinction between counterinsurgency and CT. But, after 2001, the scale and technology of that militarisation changed everything.

By the time coalition forces were hunting al-Qaeda in the mountains of Tora Bora, ‘counterterrorism’ encompassed drone strikes, special-forces raids, psychological operations and nation-building. The term expanded to the point where it lost precision. We began to see every problem—from insurgency to governance failure—through a CT frame. In doing so, we risked losing our strategic compass. CT became not just a set of tools but a world view—one that often confused defeating an enemy with

building peace. The lesson is that militarised CT, while sometimes necessary, is rarely sufficient. Kinetic success can't substitute for political settlement, legitimacy or the slow work of reconciliation. When everything becomes CT, nothing truly is.

The fourth lesson was that CT is a whole-of-society endeavour. During my work in Bangsamoro, I sat with police and community leaders who had spent decades fighting insurgents but understood that force alone could never secure peace. Real resilience depended on jobs, justice and trust. The same principle applies at home. Every major Australian CT success has relied on community partnership. When citizens see the government as a protector, not a predator, information flows and radicalisation diminishes. When trust erodes, extremists find oxygen. As violent ideologies mutate—into misogyny, conspiracy or grievance movements—our most important CT tool isn't technology but social cohesion. Cohesion is a national-security infrastructure.

The fifth lesson was that law matters—and so does how it's used. Australia's legislative response to terrorism was fast, bipartisan and effective. Control orders, continuing detention orders and the ability to list foreign terrorist organisations gave agencies the power to prevent attacks rather than mourn them. Those powers saved lives. Yet, over time, the greatest test became restraint. Power is easy to grant but hard to govern. The true strength of our CT framework lies in its legitimacy, as demonstrated through parliamentary scrutiny, judicial oversight and constant recalibration. As Justin Bassi has argued, deterrence without trust is brittle. Our challenge is to ensure that the tools we forged in fear are exercised with wisdom, transparency and proportionality.

A sixth lesson follows from the question of *ownership*. After 25 years, who really owns CT? Is it the special-forces soldier who fought the Taliban in Afghanistan, or the intelligence collector who tracked financial flows in Jakarta? The analyst in Canberra? The police officer at the airport gate? The lawmaker drafting the control order? Or the psychologist working with a radicalised youth? The academic who dedicates decades to researching and thinking about CT? The communities that live it? The truth is that they all own a piece of the puzzle that was. Each brings one fragment of an experience too complex for any single discipline to encompass. The enduring challenge is

how those fragments fit together; how we build a mosaic that's adaptive, humane and strategically coherent.

Ownership has also become contested at the international level. In the US, policy drift has seen organised-crime groups designated as terrorist entities. It's an attempt to harness the legal machinery of CT for broader coercive ends, but it risks eroding the definitional clarity that underpins legitimacy. Terrorism is a political crime motivated by ideology and aimed at intimidation; transnational organised crime is driven by profit and corruption. Conflating the two may offer short-term convenience but invites long-term confusion. If every threat becomes terrorism, then none of our responses retains meaning or proportion. Australia should resist that definitional creep. The integrity of our CT framework depends on disciplined boundaries—on knowing where CT ends and where law enforcement, economic policy and social reform begin.

The seventh lesson was that extremism evolves faster than bureaucracy. In 2001, we confronted structured organisations: cells, leadership, logistics. By 2025, we face decentralised ecosystems of grievance. Ideology has become liquid. Extremists now recruit through memes, live streams and propaganda generated by artificial intelligence (AI). The tools of violence are simple; the psychological reach is infinite. During the 1990s, I watched nationalist groups plot to steal weapons. Today, a radicalised teenager can build a digital arsenal from a bedroom. That evolution demands agility. CT can no longer sit within the narrow silo of 'national security'; it intersects with mental health, online regulation, education and ethics. Bureaucracies must move at the speed of digital radicalisation or risk permanent obsolescence.

If those are the lessons, the next 25 years will be defined by six strategic challenges.

The first is the blurring of boundaries between terrorism and statecraft. State actors increasingly weaponise ideology, financing proxy groups and exploiting online division. The *Criminal Code Amendment (State Sponsors of Terrorism) Act 2025* provides new authority to list state entities that sponsor terrorism and to extend control orders into that domain. But legislation without practice is inert. The anticipated listing of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps should be used as a live exercise in operationalising this framework—testing our interagency

coordination, international partnerships and public communication. Future deterrence must be lawful, credible and demonstrable.

The second challenge is the erosion of civility and trust. The deterioration of protest culture is an early warning. Demonstrations once symbolic of democratic vitality are increasingly hijacked by movements that prize confrontation over dialogue. Violence directed at police—such as that witnessed at the 2025 Indo Pacific International Maritime Exposition—represents not protest but a rejection of the social contract. Those same officers will one day stand between the public and the next violent extremist. The antidote is leadership that speaks plainly, condemns clearly and engages consistently. Silence isn't a strategy—it's surrender.

The third challenge is technological. The convergence of drones, encryption and AI has collapsed the distance between inspiration and action. Drones can surveil or strike; AI can radicalise or recruit. The same connectivity that empowers civil society also empowers its enemies. Future CT must embed technological foresight within government, industry and academia. Protecting Australians will depend as much on coders and engineers as on agents and analysts.

The fourth challenge is regional. Australia's security is closely tied to that of Southeast Asia. Indonesia's experience shows that even successful CT programs require constant renewal: the peace in Mindanao remains fragile; instability in Myanmar and Afghanistan continues to echo across the region. Australia's longstanding investment in regional capacity building—through policing partnerships, justice reform and intelligence cooperation—must continue. We can't secure our borders if the neighbourhood burns.

The fifth challenge is human. The long War on Terror has taken a profound toll on those who've fought it. I've watched brilliant officers worn down, families fracture, and cynicism creep into once-idealistic minds. The emotional labour of national security is invisible but immense. If we want resilient institutions, we must build resilient people. That means prioritising mental health, professional development and moral leadership. Strength and vulnerability aren't opposites; they're partners in endurance.

Sixth, despite everything changing, some threats remain the same. The ideologies that inspired al-Qaeda and Islamic State haven't disappeared; they've dispersed, adapted and found new relevance in fragile regions and online communities. Right-wing extremism, once a marginal concern, continues to re-emerge in cycles of grievance and nationalism. Lone-actor violence, motivated by distorted faith, conspiracy, or hate, still represents the most immediate danger to ordinary Australians. In our pursuit of the new—AI-enabled radicalisation, digital subcultures, grey-zone coercion—we can't afford to forget the old. The capacity of human beings to justify violence in the name of identity or belief remains a constant. CT must therefore evolve without amnesia: renewing its methods while remembering that the most dangerous ideas are rarely new, only reborn.

The next era of CT will test our capacity to evolve while staying true to our democratic values. The War on Terror taught us that security is never static. We built one of the world's most agile CT systems—legally robust, internationally respected and grounded in partnership, but that architecture will ossify if it stops learning. The goal now is not to fight the last war better but to prevent the next one from looking the same.

In the 1990s, our adversaries were visible and local. After 9/11, they became global and ideological in nature. Today, they're diffuse, digital and psychological. Yet, across that evolution, one truth has endured: terrorism feeds on fear, and democracy starves it through confidence and cohesion.

As the world marks the 25th anniversary of 9/11, Australia stands at a crossroads between memory and foresight. We owe it to the victims of that day, to those lost in Bali, Jakarta and Sydney, and to the many Australians who have carried the burden of this long campaign, to ensure that the next 25 years are defined not by reaction but by readiness.

Security is not only about preventing attacks; it's about protecting what makes us worth defending—our openness, decency and unity. Those are the values that extremists fear most. They're also the values that will keep Australia secure in whatever comes after the long war.

Victory over terror?: Australia's 'War on Terror' at home and abroad, 2001 to 2026

Chris Taylor

On the morning of 15 August 1945, Sydney erupted into spontaneous celebration. More than a hundred thousand took to the streets at the news of victory over Japan. Martin Place and the Domain were thronged by the ecstatic and the relieved, and celebrations continued into the night. The images resound even now, encapsulated in the mysterious 'dancing man' filmed pirouetting down George Street. The following day, almost half a million attended a victory parade through the city's streets.

There was never going to be a reprise of those scenes in the apparent aftermath of the 'War on Terror'. The difference of scale, the limited direct impact on most civilians' lives, and the perceived ambiguity of outcomes ensured that. Indeed, even a date for celebration would be unclear. The capture of Kabul weeks after 9/11? The execution of the Bali bombers? The successful raid in Abbottabad and Osama bin Laden's funeral at sea? The fall of Mosul and the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) caliphate? The liberation of the city of Marawi? Or just an absence, as, for example, in the end of attacks on Westerners in Indonesia after 2009?

Experts haven't been much help in this regard. We've been arguing about what counterterrorism (CT) victory means, or even whether 'victory' or 'winning' are meaningful terms, for decades.

And while for terrorists 'not losing is winning', in Bruce Hoffman's words,¹ the historical record suggests that ambiguous outcomes are common to all sides. A 2008 RAND study found that:

[M]ost [terrorist] groups ended because of operations carried out by local police or intelligence agencies or because they negotiated a settlement with their governments ... [Between 1968 and 2006,] a total of 268 [terrorist groups] ended ... another 136 splintered and 244 remained active ... [M]ost ended for one of

two reasons: They were penetrated and eliminated by local police and intelligence agencies (40 percent), or they reached a peaceful political accommodation with their government (43 percent) ... In 10 percent of cases, terrorist groups ended because they achieved victory. Military force led to the end of terrorist groups in 7 percent of cases.²

The temptation is then to revert to the tactical: metrics on, for example, 'the status of the adversary's morale, recruitment, fundraising, organisation, ability to conduct sophisticated attacks, and other vital components'.³ Or to go to the opposite extreme and define victory as an ongoing process without resolution: 'Victory should be defined not as a singular event but rather as a continuous process of providing security while maintaining society's core values in the face of terrorist threats.'⁴

However unsatisfactory the binary concept of winning and losing is in this context, the question is not unreasonable and is unavoidable when sacrifices have been called for and made: did we win the war on terror?

If we are to grapple with this question, then certain preliminary clarifications are required. In the context of this volume the 'we' in this instance is Australia. And likewise, the 'war on terror' is zeroed in line with our national responsibilities. Yes, Australia was an important, if necessarily minor, contributor to the CT efforts in Afghanistan and the Middle East (most notably in helping the Iraqis defeat ISIS). But it was at home and, most notably, in Southeast Asia that our national efforts were such that an evaluation seems worthy.

The 'War on Terror' domestically

On the home front, the experience of the past quarter-century could seem to fit neatly with the never-ending story perspective above.

Perhaps because Australia was not targeted by organised external actors in the same fashion as the US or Europe (such as in the 2004 Madrid train bombings or the 2015 Paris attacks by ISIS), although thwarted and successful attacks here were inspired and/or aided from overseas, the common impression had been of a relatively steady state of threat and response until last December's atrocity at Bondi Beach. Threats evolved, away from traditional group-level planning to inspired and directed lone actors and on to the self-radicalised, and from multimodal

mass-casualty plans (such as were disrupted by operations Pendennis and Neath) to more commonly spontaneous and *ad hoc* acts.

Nonetheless, the 2024 return to a terrorism threat level of 'Probable' contributed to the sense of ongoing threat, even if outside forces like al-Qaeda and especially its Arabian Peninsula offshoot, and ISIS, no longer loomed nearly as large.

Then, on the evening of 14 December 2025, two gunmen targeted a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi, murdering 15 men, women and children, and shattering national complacency.

For a long time, Australia was relatively successful in avoiding and preventing mass-casualty terrorist attacks. Until Bondi, the most prominent such incident had been the December 2014 siege at the Lindt Cafe in Sydney (two hostages killed), while other terrorism fatalities included the murders of civilian police employee Curtis Cheng in 2015, of Kai Hao before a 2017 siege in Brighton, Victoria, of Sisto Malaspina a year later during an attack in Bourke Street, Melbourne, and of Maurice and Zoe Antill in Brisbane in December 2020.⁵

As grim as the comparison is, given the loss of those innocent lives, such losses are a key indicator of CT success and failure. In this regard, Australia's record contrasted favourably with such mass-casualty terrorist attacks in similar circumstances (in Europe and North America) and time frames as:

- more than 190 dead in the Madrid train bombings, March 2004
- 52 dead in the 7/7 attacks in London in 2005
- 77 killed by a lone actor in Norway in 2011
- 130 civilian casualties, December 2015 in Paris (including at the Bataclan Theatre)
- 32 killed in the March 2016 bombings in Brussels
- 49 dead in the Pulse nightclub shooting of June 2016 in Orlando, Florida
- 86 murdered on Bastille Day 2016 in Nice
- 22 killed in the Manchester Arena bombing in May 2017
- 51 murdered in the Christchurch mosque attacks of March 2019
- 145 dead in the Crocus City Hall massacre in Russia, March 2024.

Undoubtedly, Australia's particular geography, and other societal differences (not least closer control over access to firearms and explosives), contributed to the more limited effect of terrorism here during the same period, as did the specific efforts of Australian security authorities and police.

But any sense of satisfaction with that historical record is now significantly tempered by the casualties at Bondi.

The 'War on Terror' in Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, there is a stronger case for assessing a CT victory, especially given the intensity of terrorist violence there in the first decade of the 21st century.

Between 2000 and 2009, terrorist violence roiled Indonesia and the Philippines.⁶ In August 2000, the Philippines Ambassador to Indonesia was targeted for assassination (in an attack that killed two other people). The following month, the Jakarta Stock Exchange was bombed, killing 15. Then the Christmas Eve church bombings across Indonesia (which killed 18 people) were followed by bombings in Manila (killing 22). But it was the coordinated bombings in Bali on the night of 12 October 2002 that brought the violence to global attention, killing more than 200 people (including 88 Australians). To this day, it remains Australia's deadliest terrorist atrocity.

That was followed by a campaign that included an attack on the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta in August 2003 (12 deaths), the 2005 bombings in Bali (20 deaths), and the 2009 JW Marriott (again) and Ritz Carlton hotel bombings (seven deaths).⁷ Elsewhere, terrorists undermined security in Aceh and Semarang, terrifying local populations. Perhaps most audaciously, in September 2004 there was a direct attack on the Australian Embassy in Jakarta (eight deaths). In the Philippines, there were *inter alia* deadly attacks on Davao City's airport and ferry terminal (39 deaths), and in 2004 the Manila Bay ferry bombing killed 116 people.⁸ There were also thwarted attack plans in Malaysia and Singapore, and in southern Thailand a persistent level of violence in border regions (and which was not the subject of the same external assistance provided selectively elsewhere in Southeast Asia).

At the heart of the terrorism in Indonesia was Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an Islamist group founded in 1993, whose ambitions were widened by the fall of the Suharto

regime in 1998 and whose capabilities were enabled by the experience of collaboration with al-Qaeda and its predecessors in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. Its terrorist campaign was accelerated by the experiences of 9/11 and then the war in Iraq. But those external events (and US-led global CT efforts) led to JI being cut off from al-Qaeda. Effectively hunted down by Indonesian and international (including Australian) agencies after Bali, JI fractured and switched its focus to ‘softer’ targets than Westerners. ‘By the end of the decade [JI was] focused more on local concerns (the “near” as opposed to “far enemy”).’⁹ JI’s last attack was the bombing of a West Java police compound in 2011.¹⁰ In June 2024, JI’s remnant leadership announced that the organisation had ceased.

Then came the effects of ISIS. In one regard, those were diversionary, for more than a thousand Southeast Asians are believed to have travelled to Syria and Iraq, and thus forgone activities at home.¹¹ Indeed, after the fall of ISIS, 689 Indonesians and 56 Malaysians were detained in Syria along with smaller numbers from elsewhere in the region.¹²

In another regard, it was emboldening. Many of the most active post-JI groups, including the reinvigorated Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), pledged allegiance to ISIS’s leadership. Eventually, as CT operations in the Middle East intensified, those leadership links would be subject to the same attrition as had previously occurred with al-Qaeda.¹³

However, the new wave of groups, including the East Indonesia Mujahideen under Santoso, and their attacks would not prove as effective as JI’s earlier efforts. The last really significant attacks in Indonesia were the Surabaya bombings (aimed at Christian churches) in May 2018, which killed 15. Featuring suicide bombings by teenagers and children, this action was so problematic that it was condemned by imprisoned JAD leader Aman Abdurrahman.¹⁴ Elsewhere, a JAD member was responsible for an attack on the then Indonesian Defence Minister in 2019. That same year, a bombing of the Jolo Cathedral in the Philippines killed 20 people.¹⁵

And it was in the southern Philippines that ISIS’s emulators, including Isnilon Hapilon’s new iteration of the ASG and the Maute brothers and their Maute Group, would attempt in May 2017 to hold the city of Marawi as the first step in a Southeast Asian caliphate.¹⁶ The result was a five-month long urban war between the terrorists and the Philippines

military (aided by Australia and the US) that would see almost a thousand terrorists killed. On 17 October, following the confirmed deaths of Hapilon and Omar Maute, President Duterte would proclaim the city liberated.

Lessons in ‘victory’?

If we accept that Australia’s CT experience in Southeast Asia constituted a victory, and that the experience domestically is now much more ambivalent post-Bondi, then what does this teach us about CT in the future, and about victory itself?¹⁷

An important lesson: victory is invariably episodic. It will always be, if not temporary, then at least ‘bounded’—by particular contexts, actors, targets and so on. If there is a dawning realisation about the ambiguity of military victory more broadly since 1945 (at least for the West), then that should be even more clear when it comes to terrorism.

After all, the events of 2000–2017 in Southeast Asia are now bounded by time. As *Preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism 2022–26: Australia’s international engagement update and way ahead* noted in April 2022, ‘Observation 1: The threat is persistent and dynamic, it is never static.’¹⁸

Contra many critics of CT practice, underlying conditions are best dealt with on their own terms, separately from terrorism. In fact, a critical requirement of victory is not to give terrorists what they want (or at least what they say they want). That doesn’t mean not compromising, but it means framing that compromise as anything other than a win.

Also, force does actually work—to a point. Even the most acclaimed political solutions (such as in Northern Ireland) could only be effectively pursued when terrorist strategy was, if not defeated, then thwarted. The effective application of force coerces terrorist individuals and organisations to seriously contemplate alternatives. The opportunity to cease pursuing terror that is presented as a result must then be ensured, by offering diversionary options.¹⁹

In Southeast Asia, that meant, for example, that Imam Samudra, Ali Ghufron and Amrozi were all convicted and executed for the first Bali bombings. Ali Imron was sentenced to life (he’s still pressing to be released). Hambali was captured and renditioned to Guantanamo,

where he remains. Abu Dujana (head of JI's military organisation) was arrested in 2007 (and released in 2015). Myriad other leaders and functionaries (think bombmakers Azahari Husin and Noordin Mohammad Top) were killed by CT forces. Even Abu Bakar Bashir (as spiritual head) went to prison in 2010 (released in 2021). Their successors were similarly disrupted: JAD's Aman Abdurrahman and Zainal Anshori were imprisoned, and both the East Indonesia Mujahideen leaders, Santoso and Ali Kalora, were killed.

Indeed, as recently as from 2021 to 2023 the Indonesians were still arresting more than 600 suspected terrorism associates.²⁰

This effective exercise of force then created the space and incentive structure, in Indonesia at least, for the diversion of JI's remnant leadership and membership away from violence; outlets for underlying ideology that dampened the appeal of violence, especially against 'Western' targets; and the assertion of civic identity by successive Indonesian governments.

Successful CT outcomes will almost always appear messy. Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement presents an apt example. There are few such clean slates as the fate of European leftist terrorism after the 1970s. The same is true in Southeast Asia today, where we're seeing a turn to more diverse, incoherent and tawdry lone actors. And we don't yet know what new forms of radicalisation, online activity and the impact of Gaza will have.²¹ There remains a persistent level of politically motivated violence in the southern Philippines, for instance.²² Will what arises ever compare with the same (anti-Western) threat that stalked the region from 2000 to 2009? We don't yet know.

But, importantly, in Southeast Asia, there have been no more mass-casualty bombings, no more targeting of embassies and foreign diplomats, and no more cities under siege. That's clearly a victory and—in particular—a victory won by the efforts and sacrifices of Indonesians, Filipinos and those who assisted them, including from Australia.

Notes

- 1 Daniel L Byman, 'Are we winning the War on Terrorism?', Brookings, 23 May 2003, [online](#), quoting Bruce Hoffman.
- 2 Seth G Jones, Martin C Libicki, 'How terrorist groups end: implications for countering al-Qa'ida', research brief, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2008, [online](#). A 53% probability of 'success' on the part of terrorist groups is worth noting!
- 3 Byman, 'Are we winning the War on Terrorism?'
- 4 Ami Ayalon, Ayal Hayut-man, 'Redefining victory in democracy's War on Terror', *Lawfare*, 18 February 2020, [online](#).
- 5 This is in addition to incidents of mass-casualty violence without the same apparent ideological, political or religious motivation, as in the 2011 deliberate fire at a Sydney nursing home, the 2017 automotive homicides in the Melbourne CBD, a 2019 shooting spree in Darwin, and the murders at Westfield Bondi Junction in April 2024.
- 6 There was of course a prehistory to this campaign. Leaving aside the longer history of Islamist militancy in Indonesia (and insurgency in the southern Philippines), in 1981 an Indonesian airliner was hijacked by the Komando Jihad group. In 1995, the Abu Sayyaf Group sacked the Mindanao city of Ipil, killing 50 people, taking hostages and stealing over half a billion pesos. See Sam Mullins, 'Chapter 7: Twenty-five years of terrorism and insurgency in Southeast Asia', in Alexander L Vuving (ed.), *Hindsight, insight, foresight: thinking about security in the Indo-Pacific*, Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, September 2020, 111, [online](#); Uday Bakhshi, Adam Roussele, *The history and evolution of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia*, Hudson Institute, 28 February 2024, [online](#).
- 7 Aisyah Llewellyn, 'How "war on terror" was fought and won in Southeast Asia—for now', *al-Jazeera*, 15 September 2023, [online](#).
- 8 Bakhshi & Roussele, *The history and evolution of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia*.
- 9 Mullins, 'Chapter 7: Twenty-five years of terrorism and insurgency in Southeast Asia', 113 (quoting either Sydney Jones or Cameron Sumpter).
- 10 Llewellyn, 'How "war on terror" was fought and won in Southeast Asia—for now'.
- 11 Mullins, 'Chapter 7: Twenty-five years of terrorism and insurgency in Southeast Asia', 115.
- 12 Mullins, 'Chapter 7: Twenty-five years of terrorism and insurgency in Southeast Asia', 119.
- 13 Mullins, 'Chapter 7: Twenty-five years of terrorism and insurgency in Southeast Asia', 115.
- 14 Mullins, 'Chapter 7: Twenty-five years of terrorism and insurgency in Southeast Asia', 121.
- 15 Llewellyn, 'How "war on terror" was fought and won in Southeast Asia—for now'.
- 16 The actual outbreak of hostilities in Marawi was less auspicious. A government attempt to capture Hapilon while he was in the city was botched, and the situation descended into an all-out battle. For a brief background on Marawi, see James Lewis, 'The Battle of Marawi: lessons for developing urban capabilities', *Australian Army Journal*, XV(1), Autumn 2019, [online](#).
- 17 See also Chris Taylor, John Coyne, Justin Bassi, '20 years since the Australian embassy bombing in Jakarta', *The Strategist*, 9 September 2024, [online](#).
- 18 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism 2022–26: Australia's international engagement update and way ahead*, Australian Government, 2022, 1, [online](#).
- 19 Julie Chernov Hwang, 'How terrorism ends: lessons from Southeast Asia', *Intelbrief*, Soufan Center, 28 March 2025, [online](#).
- 20 Llewellyn, 'How "war on terror" was fought and won in Southeast Asia—for now'.
- 21 Muhammad Makmun Rasyid, 'Indonesia's terrorist networks are adapting, not disappearing', *East Asia Forum*, 18 April 2025, [online](#); Karishma Vaswani, 'Digital terror threats are rising in Southeast Asia', *Bloomberg*, 14 September 2025, [online](#).
- 22 On 3 December 2023, a bomb attack on a church service in Marawi killed four people; ISIS affiliates claimed responsibility. See Bakhshi & Roussele, *The history and evolution of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia*.

1

Threats and Radicalisation

As antisemitism strains Australian social cohesion, the government must step forward

John Coyne

Australia's national resilience and social cohesion are under strain, with the most visible cracks seen in the alarming rise of antisemitism. Governments, most particularly the federal government, whose responsibility it is to lead national debates, desperately need to engage more forthrightly with the Australian public.

The discovery in Dural of a caravan containing explosives and, reportedly, an antisemitic message and the addresses of a synagogue and other Jewish buildings, is the latest shock that will heighten anxiety in Australia's Jewish community and further inflame public tension.

We can give police some benefit of the doubt that they had operational reasons for secrecy about the caravan, but these decisions must be balanced against the need to confront the underlying problems of extremism and hatred, and to reassure Australians that we have national leaders who are facing up to them. If our politicians had been leading the conversations that we need, there would be greater goodwill for understanding operational decisions, rather than the fraying patience that we are seeing.

Instead of confronting extremism, radicalisation and the growing influence of ideological violence, policymakers have retreated into reticence, offering platitudes that fail to give the public confidence or deter those who seek to cause harm. This absence of leadership is a communications failure and a strategic miscalculation that threatens social cohesion and national security.

The federal government's reluctance to educate and inform the public about terrorism and extremism is fuelling uncertainty and fear. Security agencies such as the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and the Australian Federal Police play a vital role in countering threats, but their mandate is to act once the danger



has escalated to the level of criminality and national security risk.

The broader responsibility—explaining the ideological drivers of extremism, reinforcing shared values, and setting clear boundaries of acceptable conduct—belongs to the government. Yet, time and again, the government has abdicated this duty, preferring to let ASIO’s annual threat assessment stand as the only authoritative voice on extremism in Australia. That is not enough. National security is not just about neutralising threats but about preventing them from taking root in the first place.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese hardly lifted anyone’s morale when speaking defensively about the discovery of the caravan during [two radio interviews](#) on Thursday morning. [On ABC radio](#), he failed to mention antisemitism at all. He refused to say when he’d learnt about it, describing that as ‘operational details’, and refused to say whether the national cabinet had discussed the investigation. Most of his commentary was about what the police had said and done. The closest he gave to an expression of the government’s view was by saying: ‘We remain concerned about this escalation.’

It wasn’t until a press conference later in the day that Albanese said, unprompted, that there was ‘zero tolerance in Australia for hatred and for antisemitism’ and that he wanted ‘any perpetrators to be hunted down and locked up’.

One of the core failures underpinning this crisis is a misinterpretation of tolerance. Australia prides itself on being an open and inclusive society, but inclusivity does not mean tolerating the intolerable. Support for terrorist leaders and groups is not free speech, nor is it a legitimate expression of diversity—it is a direct threat to social stability. When governments fail to call this out unequivocally, they enable a dangerous dynamic by which extremists feel emboldened, and the broader population grows resentful and anxious. An anxious public is not a resilient one.

While the rising cost of living is at the forefront of most Australians’ minds, physical and social security must remain the government’s highest priority. People need to feel safe, and that safety is reinforced not just by policing, but by clear, decisive leadership.

The government’s approach—avoiding public discussion for fear of inflaming tensions—belongs to a bygone era. Excessive reticence was a flawed strategy even before social media, but now, in an age in which digital communications dominate every aspect of our lives, it is a liability.

Government hesitancy leaves a vacuum that is filled by those who want society to break. Without direct and frequent public engagement, we give ground to those who distort facts, push dangerous ideologies and promote violence.

ASIO head Mike Burgess was left swinging in the breeze last September after he told the ABC that the organisation assessed entrants to Australia for any national security risk, which might not cover someone who had only expressed ‘rhetorical support’ for Hamas. Amid the political controversy that followed, the government should have swung in quickly and stressed that the wider visa check would, of course, include rhetorical support for Hamas but that this wasn’t ASIO’s job. That failed to happen, leading to days of public anger and confusion.

Equally dangerous is the government’s willingness to indulge in false equivalencies. Responding to attacks on Jewish Australians by condemning ‘all forms of hate’ or vaguely mentioning ‘antisemitism and Islamophobia’ is both politically weak and strategically harmful. Each act of violence or intimidation should be condemned for what it is—without hedging, without lumping disparate issues together, and without fear of offending those who sympathise with extremists.

This failure of clarity extends to the review of Australia’s terrorism laws, where there is discussion about removing the requirement for an ideological motive. Instead of diluting definitions, the government should lead the discussion on what ideology is, why it matters, and how it fuels extremism.

The government’s refusal to deal with reality is at the heart of this crisis. There is no neutral ground when it comes to national security. Attempting to placate all sides by responding too slowly and downplaying threats only emboldens those who seek to justify intimidation and violence.

Everyone accepts that history and geopolitics are complex—not least in the Middle East—but there is no

justification for bringing foreign conflicts onto Australian streets. Like it or not, the federal government's faltering responses have facilitated a false equivalence between Israel and Islamist terrorist groups, emboldening extremists who now see Australia as a battleground for their ideological struggles.

Australians can see the world is unstable and don't appreciate being dismissed or misled. The government's failure to engage honestly is backfiring. Public trust erodes when people feel their concerns are ignored, and social cohesion weakens without leadership. To maintain our national resilience, the government must step up, speak clearly and reassert the values that make Australia a safe and united society. Silence is not a strategy—it's a surrender.

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Stopping anti-Semitic terrorism in Australia

Michael Pezzullo

In the next six months there is a greater than **50 per cent chance of a terrorist attack** being planned and possibly carried out in Australia. The Director-General of Security told us so on August 5, 2024, when the terrorist threat level was raised to "probable". The Jewish Australian community has every right to be gravely concerned that Jewish people and places, such as synagogues, might be the targets of such an attack. That this is even a possibility should shock all Australians.

We can be very confident that ASIO, the AFP, state and territory police and other agencies will do everything in their power to **stop such an attack**. However, history shows that while many terrorist attacks are stopped, some attempts succeed. Afterwards, commissions of inquiry typically find that governmental structures and processes were deficient, responsibilities were not clearly assigned, and information flows had broken down. Those were the lessons, for instance, of the institutional failures that occurred in the lead-up to the 9/11 attacks.

We must not minimise the gravity of this situation by thinking that this threat has little to do with the lives of

Australians generally. Were a mass casualty terrorist attack to occur, perhaps on the scale of the bombing of the Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in July 1994, which killed 85 people, Australia would never be the same again afterwards. Our idea of Australia as being a peaceful and cohesive society would be **transformed overnight**, for the worst.

The federal government is charged with the defence of the nation, the protection of its sovereignty, and the maintenance of the "peace, order, and good government" of the commonwealth, the latter phrase being contained in the Constitution. If the government fails in any of these first duties of state, no amount of success in other fields will protect it from condemnation, today and in history's enduring judgment.

While police and security intelligence officers, and other officials, have to grapple at the operational coalface with the complex challenge of counter-terrorism work, it is the government that has the higher and prior responsibility to prevent matters developing to the point where the nation is being riven by polarisation and social fractures, and where there is a risk that hateful beliefs might be acted upon through terroristic violence.

As in war, countering terrorism requires active and involved ministerial leadership, and the wielding of the power of ministerial office to ensure that institutional failures are remedied before tragedy strikes, and not in the aftermath.

In counter-terrorism work, it is vitally important that the architecture of roles and responsibilities is clear, especially in a federation, that governmental structures reflect this clarity, that functions are distributed accordingly, and that there is integration and unity of effort across agencies and jurisdictions. Institutional failures are more likely to occur when the assignment of roles and responsibilities lacks clarity. Reporting lines become tangled. Information flows are impaired. Coherence of effort breaks down.

At the most foundational level, it is not even clear who is the lead federal minister of the government. Under the current Administrative Arrangements Order, the document that sets out the responsibilities of ministerial departments of state, the responsibility for "law enforcement policy and operations" is vested with the Attorney-General, while the responsibility for "national security policy and operations"

is vested with the Minister for Home Affairs. So, who is the minister for counter-terrorism?

This blurring of responsibilities, and the associated transfer since May 2022 of the AFP, other law enforcement agencies, and then ASIO from the Home Affairs ministry to the Attorney-General's, were retrograde steps. They unravelled the clarity and unification of effort that had been put in place by the Turnbull government in December 2017, when the Department of Home Affairs was established in its modern form. Were there to be a major terrorist attack, this blurring of responsibilities, and the consequential weakening of the nation's counter-terrorism machinery, would be key exhibits in any resultant commission of inquiry.

In the same way that the Minister for Defence would be expected to take the day-to-day lead in matters of war – and we would not have separate ministers for the navy, the army, and the air force pulling in different directions – the Minister for Home Affairs should lead in all matters of domestic security and federal law enforcement. The minister should have “authority over the whole scene”, as Winston Churchill used to say.

Sound arrangements were in place during the period December 2017 to May 2022, when the minister, the department, and ASIO, the AFP, the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission and AUSTRAC were able to work together as a cohesive team, with the minister having “authority over the whole scene”.

This is not a theoretical claim. It was our lived experience. The relevant machinery of government was integrated. Information flows were seamless. Effort was unified. Australia was safer.

In the absence of a senior minister having such authority, and the information, so that they are able to set strategic directions and to give lawful directions as might be necessary, too much of the burden of accountability in counter-terrorism is being borne by officers who, while being highly diligent and resolutely determined in their work, are not charged with being accountable to the parliament, and the people.

Only an empowered minister who has full command of all of the facts of an evolving situation can probe, question, nudge and – at times – overrule, subject to having the legal authority to do so.

This is the basis for the successful governance of Operation Sovereign Borders. It is how we would fight a war. Why is counter-terrorism being treated differently? It should not be.

Here is what needs to be done, without delay. These measures might strike the reader as being concerned with technical matters of governmental machinery. They are. Getting the machinery and processes of counter-terrorism right keeps us safe, and it is precisely these matters that any future commission of inquiry into a major terrorist attack would have to examine in painstaking detail.

First, the AAO should be amended this afternoon, assigning explicit ministerial responsibility for counter-terrorism to the Minister for Home Affairs. Accompanying instructions should be issued, also this afternoon, to the Director-General of Security and the AFP Commissioner directing them to report to the minister with immediate effect. In due course, the Department of Home Affairs should be reconstituted fully.

Second, the Prime Minister, consulting with first ministers, should declare the existence of a National Terrorist Situation, under the provisions of the National Counter-Terrorism Plan. That plan is the agreed national arrangement for dealing with terrorism, and it should be fully activated, without the government waiting for an attack to succeed. Some might quibble that a “terrorist incident” has not yet occurred. Let them. They can answer before the judgment of history.

The declaration of an NTS would open the way for the commonwealth to assume full strategic leadership of the overall anti-Semitism effort.

The states and territories have vital supporting roles to play in this regard, as they would in any national crisis. However, the severity of the situation has reached a point where the commonwealth now has to lead. Imagine no one bothering to tell Churchill in 1940 that German-speaking parachutists had landed in Sussex, because detective chief superintendent Foyle had the matter in hand!

Had the recent caravan bomb plot succeeded, it would have been an attack on Australia, not an attack on an individual state.

Accordingly, and third, the government should immediately establish a multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional taskforce within the Centre for Counter-Terrorism Co-ordination in the Department of Home Affairs. This should include state and territory officials. The taskforce should be led by the commonwealth Counter-Terrorism Co-ordinator within Home Affairs. The office of Co-ordinator was established in the wake of the Martin Place siege of December 2014, and the subsequent review that was undertaken of Australia's counter-terrorism machinery.

The taskforce should be built around these three missions: "prevent and protect" (led by Home Affairs); "intelligence" (led by ASIO, working with the AFP, ACIC, AUSTRAC, and other intelligence agencies); and "disruption" (led by the AFP, working with ASIO and state and territory police). This model would mirror the successful Operation Sovereign Borders model that has been in place since late 2013, with a key additional element being the integration of state and territory police, who would retain primacy for the investigation of offending that was related to state and territory laws, under the umbrella of the disruption mission.

The "battle rhythm" of the taskforce should be driven by the provision by the co-ordinator of a daily situation report to the minister, which would provide him with the latest information regarding the threat picture and the operational situation. Nothing more focuses the mind of officers than the need to work to the steady beat of ministerial oversight. This is what happens in war, and in other domestic security crises such as dealing with illegal boat arrivals. It should drive action here too. The report should be suitably classified and constructed such that those few with a comprehensive need to know everything would be able to be fully informed, while those with a lesser need to know would be informed of only those matters that fell within their responsibility. On advice, but in the end exercising his own judgment, the minister should decide what should be said publicly, and when – always balancing the obligation to inform and reassure the public with the imperative to protect operations.

Fourth, national cabinet should agree to the establishment of a national crisis committee of relevant state and territory ministers, to be led by the Minister for Home Affairs. This committee should meet weekly, or more frequently as might be necessary. It would provide a regular opportunity

for the co-ordinator and others to brief ministers, and to act as required on any collective decisions that they might take. National cabinet should be primed to meet urgently, as circumstances require it.

Fifth, the co-ordinator should develop a strategy for a national community engagement campaign, in consultation with commonwealth departments and agencies, the first secretaries of the states and territories, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, and others with particular expertise in the field. Special Anti-Semitism Envoy Jillian Segal should be appointed to be the principal strategic adviser to the co-ordinator and the taskforce in this and all other regards, while retaining her direct reporting line to the Prime Minister and the Home Affairs Minister. She should be given special intelligence and other briefings so she can better perform her functions.

Drawing on the best practice in countering violent extremism, and combating anti-Semitism, including by way of better Holocaust education, the aim of the campaign would be to counter the very particular and pernicious narratives and ideologies that underpin and sustain anti-Jewish hatred.

Success in this regard will not be achieved by generalised anti-racism and anti-discrimination efforts, and well-meaning pleas for the maintenance of social cohesion, as important as these are. Anti-Semitism has to be countered specifically at the level of narrative and ideology, having regard to the particulars of this ancient hatred. Such a campaign should expose and challenge anti-Jewish tropes, memes, conspiracy narratives, signifiers, and so on. It would have to be mounted across a wide array of social media platforms, and it would ideally involve prominent Australians, including faith leaders, calling out this hatred, and standing with Jewish Australians.

Sixth, the taskforce should work with technology companies and other data providers to generate a better online "dragnet" of anti-Semitic content, built on more powerful, lawful AI-assisted searches for such material, [to address the data problems that were recently identified by Mike Kelly in these pages](#).

A better "dragnet" would generate more leads for intelligence and investigative work, support takedown efforts by the eSafety Commissioner, and

assist in the shaping and targeting of the community engagement campaign.

Seventh, the co-ordinator, working in conjunction with the commonwealth Department of Education and the vice-chancellors of universities, should prepare a plan for the minister's consideration on making our universities safe for Jewish staff and students. Some universities have become hotbeds of hatred. This should not be tolerated. Perpetrators should be dealt with decisively. Sit-ins and encampments should be shut down. This is not an issue of free speech. It is intimidation that has no place in civil discourse.

Eighth, the minister should convene an urgent meeting of the Five Country Ministerial grouping, which brings together the security ministers of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Britain and the US. This forum has worked very effectively to crack tough domestic security and public safety issues, doing so on the basis of the very highly classified intelligence that is shared among the Five Eyes partners. The Five Country Ministerial group should focus especially on the foreign state and other actors who are almost certainly operating in the shadows to seed and amplify anti-Jewish hatred. Special attention should be paid to Iran, which has a record of sponsoring attacks against Jewish people and places around the world. The FBI and MI5 warned of the threat of Iranian-backed terrorism in the immediate wake of the October 7 attack on Israel.

Ninth, the minister should reassure himself that effective plans are in place to deal with mass casualty bombing attacks, active shooter contingencies, siege/hostage recovery situations, and car-ramming attacks. With the Minister for Defence, he should satisfy himself that the call-out arrangements under Part IIIAAA of the Defence Act are in order, and that the ADF's Tactical Assault Groups can be quickly deployed.

He should also instruct the co-ordinator to ensure that the guidance for the protection of crowded places, schools and places of worship is current, and has been promulgated effectively to the Jewish community, and to the owners and controllers of relevant physical places. Similarly, access to dangerous chemicals and explosives should be reviewed and tightened as required, and preparations made for the lawful deployment of

counter-drone capabilities at certain locations, to defend against drone-mounted attacks.

Finally, the minister should direct Home Affairs to expedite the cancellation on character grounds of the visas of any non-citizens who espouse extremist anti-Semitic viewpoints. A new ministerial direction to decision-makers should be promulgated to ensure that consistently decisive decisions are being taken in this regard.

These measures have a single theme. We know, from the findings of commissions of inquiry, terrorist attacks are more likely to occur where there has been a failure of central co-ordination and direction, a fragmentation of effort, and a breakdown in information flows.

What is suggested here could be set in motion this afternoon. Doing so would not reflect any criticism of officials, and certainly not of the operational teams who are doing their job. However, they do not bear the onerous burden of being responsible for "the whole scene". That charge falls to the government, which also needs to do its job.

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2

Government leadership, policy and legislation

Australia's new CT and CVE strategy: light on policy and specifics

Henry Campbell



Image: Australian Federal Police Association

Australia has a new counterterrorism (CT) and counter-violent extremism (CVE) strategy—but it's light on counterterrorism and lacking in strategy. While it introduces two new CVE measures, it presents itself more as a communicative document than a real strategy or action plan.

Titled 'A Safer Australia – Australia's Counter-terrorism and Violent Extremism Strategy 2025', it was quietly released on 17 January, two years after then home affairs minister Clare O'Neil vowed to revise and update the strategy of 2022. Yet there is little to show for two years of development.

As of August 2024, Australia's national terrorist threat level is 'probable'—higher than when the previous strategy was released. The document also arrives amid a spate of antisemitic incidents in Sydney and Melbourne and increasing political pressure on government to respond. Clearly, the title of 'A Safer Australia' does not reflect our current security climate.

The strategy will improve Australia's early-intervention capacity. But it is a CVE strategy, not a CT strategy: it is focused on community intervention programs, not Australia's capability to pre-empt or respond to terrorist acts. The document does not provide new CT policy,



resourcing or strategic direction. A comprehensive strategy should address both.

Even on CVE it is light on policy ideas and specifics, supporting criticisms that the department has lacked in-house capability to lead on CT policy since the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation were moved outside it.

The strategy begins with a sober assessment of the threat landscape and focuses on countering rising youth violent extremism, as well as highlighting changes to the character of terrorism. But these challenges—including hybrid ideologies and youth radicalisation—were discussed in 2024 by ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess in greater and more engaging detail.

It aims to prevent CVE at a community level through two main initiatives. Firstly, the government intends to nearly double funding to state and territory partners for CVE intervention programs, which they lead, and commit to ongoing funding. Secondly, it will establish a national version of the successful NSW Step Together program, a confidential, non-police community support service that parents can contact if they are concerned their child is radicalising. The government will also better include young people in developing CVE policy.

These will not address the drivers of youth extremism, including real and perceived grievances. The strategy also highlights the challenge of online spaces and radicalisation but commits only to closer collaboration with technology companies and partners. It overlooks structural factors contributing to the rise of violent extremism. More funding and a federal helpline are positives but are small offerings after two years of delay.

Instead of policy innovation, the strategy repeatedly refers to existing measures and ‘improving partnerships and collaboration’ with various stakeholders. It rarely provides examples of how it will do this.

For instance, when announcing the strategy, Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke highlighted an ongoing commitment to engaging Southeast Asian partners—an important measure that already exists. The strategy introduces no mechanisms for engagement or deepening relationships. Instead, it references the 2022 ASEAN-Australia Counter-Terrorism Dialogue.

For CT, the strategy is seemingly more focused on communications than action, saying in its executive summary: ‘The Strategy is for all Australians to develop a greater understanding of the evolving threat and what Australian governments are doing to respond to those challenges.’

Transparency and communication with the public are important, but they are not a strategy. Furthermore, the government is hardly promoting transparency by releasing the document with little notice on a Friday in mid-January.

Instead of foreshadowing new initiatives, the document commits to improved bureaucracy and internal functions, recommending improved internal assessment pathways and better consultation. Its action plan calls for yet another government review into existing frameworks. After a considerable wait for this strategy, it calls for more waiting.

Instead of new initiatives, it explicitly defends the status quo, saying ‘our current system for preventing and responding to terrorism is mature and works effectively.’

Certainly, Australia’s national security professionals at the coalface have an excellent record. But such confidence in the system contradicts reporting from September 2024 of a breakdown in collaboration between the federal government and the states and territories over the National Counter-Terrorism Plan—describing the situation as an unprecedented ‘[clusterf—k](#)’.

A key issue highlighted was the Home Affairs limited capacity to deliver counterterrorism policy, with migration absorbing significant time and resources. Similar issues were [raised](#) by ASPI’s Justin Bassi and John Coyne in August, with the division of counterterrorism responsibility between Home Affairs and the Attorney-General’s Department splitting expertise.

A real CT and CVE strategy requires new policy, more specifics and clear objectives. An increasingly difficult operational environment demands innovative policy backed by expertise. Terrorism is evolving and the threat it poses is increasing. Policy and resourcing need to be commensurate with this challenge.

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A political fix in hate-crime and terror legislation shows the government isn't leading

Henry Campbell



Image: Malcolm Tredinnick/Flickr

After bowing to the opposition on mandatory minimum sentences, the Australian government needs to reestablish its leadership in national security.

Australia's new anti hate crime [amendment](#) includes mandatory minimum sentencing for terrorism and certain hate crimes. The Labor government had resisted implementing mandatory minimums, but the Liberal-National opposition called for it.

Parliament passed the bill for the law, the Criminal Code Amendment (Hate Crimes) Bill 2024, on 6 February.

Introduced to the House in September, the law commendably extends protection against hate crimes to characteristics including gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity and disability. It also creates a new hate crime offence for damaging (or threatening to damage) property and motor vehicles.

As recently as 20 January, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, opposing mandatory minimum sentencing in the bill, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that such a measure would lead to 'counterproductive issues'.

The bill as passed, however, includes mandatory minimum sentences for:

- Committing a terrorist act or being a member of a terrorist organisation (six years);
- Financing terrorism (three years);
- Publicly displaying Nazi or terrorist organisation symbols or performing a Nazi salute (one year); and

—Advocating force or violence through damage to property (one year).

The effectiveness of mandatory minimum sentences is debated. Particularly within the legal community, there are concerns that they pose risks to the independence of the judicial system. Their inclusion in the bill is best explained as a government attempt to avoid amplifying the public national security discussion.

The opposition called for the measures six weeks before the bill was passed. It criticised the government's handling of a range of national security issues, including the response to an arson attack on Melbourne's Adass Israel Synagogue in December 2024 and, more recently, the prime minister not being briefed on an explosive-laden caravan in Dural, Sydney.

Mounting political pressure appears to be forcing the government's hand. Albanese reportedly overruled Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus to support mandatory minimum sentencing. This isn't the first time Albanese has changed his mind on criminal and security policy. He has done so on terrorism and sex crimes against children, so this latest decision doesn't set a new precedent.

After the addition of mandatory minimum sentencing, Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke quickly shepherded the bill through Parliament, and there was reportedly little need for negotiation with the crossbench in the Senate.

Albanese's apparent change of heart is a defensive move, protecting the government from further criticism. But the government's role is to lead on national security issues—something it has struggled to do since the High Court's 2023 decision in the case *NZYQ v Minister for Immigration* to release non-citizen criminal offenders held in indefinite detention.

National security demands greater attention. It is rarely the most important issue to the electorate, but poor national security records have bedevilled past governments.

The attorney-general and home affairs minister each have overlapping national security responsibilities, reflecting the unresolved departmental divide of policy and operational responsibilities. The government needs stronger and clearer messaging and policy, driven by a dedicated spokesperson.

ASPI's Justin Bassi and John Coyne have argued that the muddled national security framework is diminishing departmental capacities to respond to counterterrorism and related issues. Similarly, the unclear division of responsibility appears to limit ministerial responsiveness, opening space for the parliamentary opposition to cut through.

Another issue is the overburdening of ministers. For example, Burke is also minister for immigration and multicultural affairs, cyber security and the arts. Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong is also leader in the Senate. Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles is also minister for defence. All three are highly capable, but they have been forced to juggle competing priorities. At this moment national security needs unwavering focus.

To reclaim leadership on national security, the government should develop effective policies that can be announced and implemented in the short term. A national hate crime register, for example, would provide a central data source for law enforcement, policymakers and researchers. Better understanding of the problem will allow us to better combat it.

The government should also provide more resources for law enforcement and intelligence to establish a national unit dedicated to combating hate crimes. This could fall within the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission or a joint taskforce. Special operations currently address hate crimes, but a dedicated unit would provide permanent attention to this challenge.

Incumbent governments must assert themselves as national security leaders. Instead of conceding to implementing doubtful measures, the government should refocus its national security posture to develop effective policy.

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Why Australia's terrorism definition still works

John Coyne, Chris Taylor and Susan Thompson



Image: Ben Rowe/Flickr.

The definition of a 'terrorist act' included in Australia's Criminal Code since 2002 has been important in protecting Australia's national security and reinforcing the resilience of our democratic institutions. That definition, currently the subject of an inquiry by the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor (INSLM), continues to be relevant and effective. It should be retained with minimal revision.

We welcomed an opportunity to engage with the INSLM to discuss the definition of a 'terrorist act' as outlined in section 100.1 of the *Criminal Code Act 1995*. Our subsequent [submission](#) to his [inquiry](#) reflects a policy and operational perspective grounded in the realities of operational and strategic counterterrorism, rather than a legalistic or academic critique.

Since its introduction, the terrorism definition has been reviewed seven times by different institutions and jurisdictions, yet no substantive amendments have been adopted. One interpretation might be that the number of reviews and recommendations reflects some kind of failing. We suggest that it instead reflects the reality that recommended revisions have simply not had public nor political support.

We reject the premise that absence of change implies deficiency. The burden of proof lies with those advocating for revision to demonstrate that an alternative definition would better serve Australia's interests by being more effective, more proportionate, more protective of rights and more consistent with international obligations. To date, no such case has been convincingly made.

A core strength of the current definition is its inclusion of a motivational element: that a terrorist act must be committed with the intent of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause. This is not a semantic flourish; it's foundational. As our submission notes:

Terrorism is first and foremost a crime directed against the state and the nation, regardless of the specific target of the action or threat. Terrorism's unique effect on society and government makes it particularly damaging to social cohesion within a democracy. For terrorism is an exercise in the negation of politics—in so far as violence for political, religious or ideological purposes within a constitutional democracy and society simply cannot be tolerated. It represents an unacceptable challenge to the lawful monopoly on violence by the democratic state. All the other ills (including the terrible harms visited on people or the population) are important but secondary to this point.

Some have proposed removing 'religious' and 'political' motivations, arguing that 'ideological' alone is sufficient. We disagree. In an era of increasingly mixed and hybrid motivations—where attackers may be driven by a blend of grievances, ideologies and personal pathologies—narrowing the definition would be counterproductive.

The inclusion of 'religious' motivation is necessary for the definition's operational functionality. The INSLM inquiry's own issues paper finds that nearly 95 percent of terrorism convictions in Australia have involved religious motivation, predominantly linked to Islamist extremism. This is not a function of the law's wording, but a reflection of the threat environment.

Aspects of Australia's terrorism threat landscape have changed significantly since 2002. The rise of online radicalisation, proliferation of lone actors—often minors—and emergence of new ideological drivers such as misogyny and ethnonationalism have reshaped the operational environment.

In our view, these changes reinforce, rather than undermine, the need for a broad and flexible definition. The current framework accommodates this complexity. For example, ASPI's past [research](#) into misogynist incel ideology demonstrates how emerging threats can potentially be captured under the existing legal structure when they are ideologically motivated and violent.

The law is not responsible for the social conditions giving rise to radicalisation. It is, however, central to enabling early intervention and disruption, especially when warning times are shrinking.

We support the current exclusion of 'advocacy, protest or dissent' from the terrorism definition. However, we caution against further expanding this exclusion, as some have suggested. In a time of worrying political polarisation and attempts to legitimise politically motivated violence in democratic societies, weakening this boundary would be unwise. Serious property damage, when committed with terrorist intent, must remain within the scope of the law. Terrorism is about intent and effect, not just physical injury.

We are not opposed to all change. There are opportunities for limited, sensible improvements that preserve the law's intent and operational utility. These include potentially:

- Expanding the definition of 'harm' to include psychological harm, aligning it with other legal contexts;
- Explicitly including hostage-taking and kidnapping as terrorist acts to aid prosecution; and
- Separating terrorist acts and threats into distinct offences, while not inadvertently disincentivising agencies from acting early and precisely to disrupt threats.

These refinements would enhance clarity and prosecutorial effectiveness without compromising the effective operation of the law.

Australia's terrorism definition has stood the test of time. It has enabled security agencies and police to act decisively and proportionately in the face of evolving threats. It has not eroded civil liberties in any demonstrated, substantive way, and it continues to enjoy public and parliamentary support.

In a period marked by social division and rising extremism, now is not the time to weaken the legal foundations of Australia's counterterrorism framework. We encourage the INSLM to prioritise operational effectiveness and national resilience in his considerations. The current definition is not perfect, but it is principled, practical and proven.

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When politics turns deadly: the case for a national resilience campaign

Justin Bassi and James Corera



Image: Gage Skidmore/Flickr

The killing of conservative activist Charlie Kirk in the United States on 10 September should jolt us all, regardless of politics or geography. But a key question is what we are jolted into doing. Should it be permissive acceptance that the US, western society and democracy are all now in such a state of decline and division from which there is no return? Or should it be a renewed conviction of our responsibility to remind the public why democracy thrives on debate and the binding forces of the very freedoms that enable individuals to choose to be different and to disagree?

It should be that renewed conviction, one that prompts an energetic public information campaign aimed at promoting the notion of agreeable disagreement, of amicable diversity of view. It should also help inoculate Australians against foreign-interference intrusions that seek to exploit disagreement. It should reinforce our alarmingly weakening social resilience.

In recent years the US has endured a grim pattern of politically motivated attacks: the 2025 murder of Minnesota Democratic legislator Melissa Hartmann and her husband, the 2022 assault on Nancy Pelosi's husband, the shooting of Republican congressman Steve Scalise in 2017, the murder of a federal judge's family in 2020 and threats against Supreme Court justices. The ideologies behind these attacks differ, but we see the same violent contempt for democratic process and debate. Politically motivated violence (PMV) was prevalent in previous eras. Now it's back.

And this is not a uniquely American pathology. PMV ignores party lines and flourishes when civic debate collapses into tribal grievance. The quote misattributed to Voltaire, 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it', has become 'I disagree with what you say, so you have no right to say it.' Guns make the US's incidents deadlier, but the underlying drivers of PMV—hyper-polarisation, online radicalisation and the easy weaponisation of conspiracy—are not confined to the US. Australia also needs to confront these dynamics before they metastasise here.

Australia's director-general of security, Mike Burgess, has warned that PMV now stands alongside espionage and foreign interference as a principal national-security threat. In his 2024 Annual Threat Assessment, Burgess emphasised that spirited debate and peaceful protest were hallmarks of a healthy democracy but cautioned that anti-authority beliefs were spreading, trust in institutions eroding and inflammatory behaviour becoming normalised.

Bipartisan resolve to confront PMV, regardless of ideology, is essential. And yet, despite public statements of mourning spanning the political aisle, there has so far been little fertile ground for practical cooperation in Washington. Australia should work to prevent the same happening here while simultaneously bolstering existing cooperation with the US and other partners on shared PMV experience. This initiative should focus on lessons learned. One is the importance of politicians facing up to genuine public concerns, such as those about illegal immigration, rather than either downplaying them and letting them become fuel for division or overplaying them and directly stoking division.

Confronting all democratic partners is that the threat environment is no longer neatly partisan. Extremist violence is increasing, persistent and dynamic, cutting across ideologies and defying the old left/right buckets that politicians and the media are used to. Every time a political leader points to 'the far right' or 'the far left' as the culprit, the national conversation shrinks. Simplifying complexity into tribal blame might reassure supporter bases, but it leaves the real drivers of violence unchallenged—and gives oxygen to those who thrive on grievance, division and parochialism. It sets up two adversarial camps rather than offering a path to

unity on principles even if there is disagreement on individual policies.

PMV now emerges from diverse cohorts—lone wolves, conspiracy movements, single-issue ideologues, foreign-influenced agitators—that can't be mapped to a single side of politics or ideology. Foreign states are using information operations and online manipulation to inflame social tensions and amplify differences. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East, for example, shows that old problems—sectarian tensions, ethno-nationalism, imported grievances—remain potent. It's precisely in this environment that foreign interference and information operations find fertile ground, eroding trust in democratic institutions and debate. They replace national unity with internecine hatred.

That makes social cohesion a core national-security asset. In his final address to the nation in 2017, president Barack Obama reflected that 'democracy does not require uniformity. Our founders argued. They quarrelled. Eventually they compromised. They expected us to do the same. But they knew that democracy does require a basic sense of solidarity—the idea that for all our outward differences, we're all in this together.' Such sentiment may appear quaint in 2025, yet a society able to debate, disagree and still hold together is far harder to manipulate and more resilient to crisis moments that will inevitably arise. But the public square is eroding. Too often, disagreement is now treated as extremism. The result is a chilling of debate precisely when democratic resilience depends on it.

This is where political and strategic communication is so critical to national discourse and resilience. Australia has a proud history of national campaigns that build shared identity: the 'Life. Be in it.' public health campaign, the centenary-of-federation ads that taught generations who our first prime minister was, and Telstra's promotion of unity in football under the motto 'It's the things that set us apart that bring us together.' These were community-building. Importantly, none forced a view on which activities had to be done—which footy team had to be followed or which former politician was best. They promoted a stronger community in which each person could still be his or herself.

Regional partners offer contemporary examples. Singapore's SGSecure initiative combines grassroots

preparedness training, community dialogues and a relentless 'not if, but when' message to embed counter-terrorism and social-cohesion reflexes across society. It recognises, as Australia should, that resilience is both a domestic and foreign-policy imperative: protection against violence and against the erosion of trust that is being exploited by hostile states and individuals alike.

We need the same spirit that once underpinned 'Life. Be In It', but this time centred on national resilience. A campaign that celebrates democratic disagreement, inoculates against foreign manipulation and reminds Australians that unity is a choice, not a given. Bipartisan commitment to confronting PMV is a start. But, without a parallel effort to support the social fabric that extremists of all types seek to tear, it won't be enough. The fundamental truth remains; nations are stronger together than divided. It starts with relearning that it is okay to be different in pursuit of making a difference and that debate is not the end of democracy but its core strength.

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Think you know terrorism when you see it? A new inquiry says think again

Susan Thomson

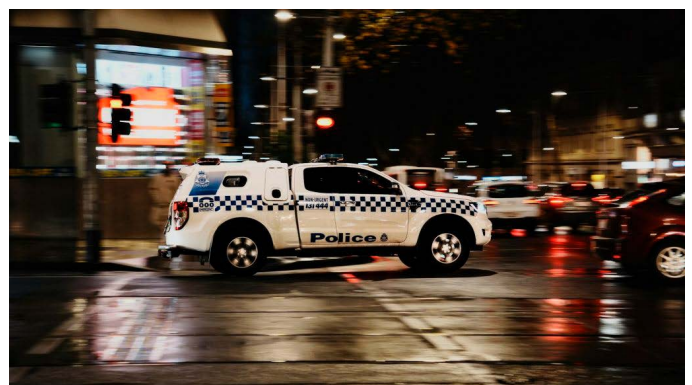


Image: Irham Setyaki/Unsplash.

Amid global conflict, rising extremism and a heightened national terror threat level, re-defining 'terrorism' in Australian law looks set to be a national security and political challenge for the government. This follows the launch of an [inquiry](#) by the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor (INSLM), Jake Blight.

Terrorism is a particularly distinct and reviled form of violent crime, requiring a very specific definition. Since 2002, a ‘terrorist act’ has been defined in Australia (section 100.1 of the Criminal Code) as an action or threat:

—with a terrorist purpose: an intention to coerce or intimidate an Australian or foreign government or intimidate the public or a section of the public;

—with a terrorist motive: an intention to advance a political, religious or ideological cause;

—applying to specific harms, including death, serious physical harm or serious property damage; and

—not including ‘advocacy, protest, dissent or industrial action not intended to cause serious harm to persons’.

Key issues being investigated in INSLM’s review are the definition’s effectiveness; whether appropriate safeguards protect individual rights; if the definition remains necessary and proportionate to the current terrorism threat; and whether the definition is consistent with international obligations. So why this inquiry, and why now?

Blight makes a three-point case. First, as it has been 23 years since the definition was enshrined in law, a review is warranted. Second, the terrorist threat has evolved. There’s been a shift away from organised groups aiming for mass casualty events with sophisticated weaponry. Most terrorism offences are now committed by solo actors using rudimentary tools. They are often minors, radicalised online. Third, the sheer number of subsequent laws that hinge on the initial definition is no longer practicable.

On the surface, Blight’s points could suggest softening the law to reflect a lower-scale terrorism profile. But this overlooks an important change: the reduction in warning time for authorities. Unlike organised groups planning over months, lone actors strike with little, if any notice, often invisible to intelligence. This makes the clarity and scope of the terrorism definition more—not less—critical today.

The INSLM has launched this inquiry on its own initiative, reflecting the increasing prominence of the office. Once a part-time job for Sydney barristers, with a remit tied narrowly to terrorism legislation and overshadowed by established oversight mechanisms such as the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security (IGIS) and the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and

Security (PJCIS), INSLM is now very different from when it was first established.

It’s now a full-time position, occupied by a lawyer with deep national security experience, with staff allowing for [simultaneous inquiries](#). The government increasingly views INSLM as equal with the IGIS and PJCIS—as was apparent from Attorney-General Michelle Rowland’s [remarks](#) at the launch. She specifically highlighted INSLM’s empowerment via one of the earliest bills of this parliament, ‘the Strengthening oversight of Australia’s National Intelligence Community [Bill](#), which expands the Monitor’s remit to ensure they are empowered to review any counter-terrorism or national security law on its own motion’.

So, what do the issues paper and the [launch](#) tell us about the inquiry’s likely focus? Joining Blight on the launch’s discussion panel were two other lawyers: UN Special Rapporteur Ben Saul and Law Council president Juliana Warner. Between their comments and the paper’s tenor, it’s clear that the inquiry is examining hot-button issues, including whether religious motivation should still be listed; whether property damage should count as harm; and whether actions directed at international organisations should be covered. Each of these questions sounds narrow, but the answers would redraw the boundary between terrorism and protest, between coercion and vandalism.

The inquiry is now open for submissions until 14 October, with public and private hearings scheduled for late 2025 and early 2026. A report with INSLM’s recommendations is expected in the first half of next year.

That report will be consequential. As Blight has noted, the government has agreed upon (if not yet acted upon) his past recommendations, for example on Australia’s existing secrecy offences. That means that if INSLM’s recommendations are perceived as watering down the terrorism definition, the government could risk being wedged on a national security issue, especially given that the terrorism threat level has been raised to ‘[probable](#)’.

Alternatively, the government might be presented recommendations for sensible, prudent adjustments to the law—for example, adjustments to ensure the law better accounts for the mental harm caused by terrorism, or to recognise hostage-taking as a terrorist action.

The challenge is not to water down the definition to match a changing threat, but to keep it sharp enough to distinguish terrorism from other forms of violence, precise enough to preserve democratic space and robust enough to underpin the entire counterterrorism system.

That's why it's important that ordinary Australians, including victims of terrorism and their families and friends, get to have their say on what terrorism will mean in the future.

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Expelling the ambassador—and protecting society with less than criminal-court proof

John Coyne and James Corera

Australia's decision on Tuesday to expel Iran's ambassador is more than a diplomatic headline; it's a test of how democracies weigh evidence and act in the face of uncertainty.

Different parts of government operate with different standards of proof, including criminal courts, civil tribunals and national security intelligence agencies all apply their own thresholds, with distinct mathematical logics and risks. The challenge for us is about which standard is being applied, so that decisive action in defence of sovereignty does not come at the expense of public trust in justice.

Intelligence agencies often cannot afford to wait for courtroom-level proof before acting—especially in terrorism, where prevention demands intervention before an attack occurs. The absence of prosecutions, in this context, often reflects success, with threats disrupted early and quietly, long before harm materialises.

In the criminal justice system, the burden of proof is at its highest, 'beyond a reasonable doubt.' Courts avoid percentages, but the standard implies a confidence level of more than 90 percent, reflecting the principle that it's better to acquit 10 guilty people than convict one innocent. Civil and administrative law applies a lower threshold, the 'balance of probabilities', meaning a likelihood of 50 percent or more, because disputes over

contracts, visas or entitlements cannot be held to the same evidentiary standard as crimes. Underpinning both approaches is the assumption that the world is generally transparent, punctuated only by moments of deception or concealment.

Intelligence work, however, inverts that presumption. Its starting point is that opacity is the norm, with states and non-state actors working to create uncertainty. Judgments in intelligence, therefore, begin from a very different basis, where moments of clarity are rare, fleeting and contested.

Analysts rarely have the luxury of certainty, let alone the proof needed for a criminal conviction. Instead, they deal in probabilities, not proofs. Their calibrated terms, such as 'likely', 'highly probable' and or 'remote chance', reflect a form of statistical reasoning (called Bayesian) that adjusts as fragments of data accumulate. A 'highly likely' judgment might equate to 70 to 80 percent confidence.

Over the past several decades, agencies and expert communities have grappled with the challenge that such non-mathematical terms have very different meanings to different audiences. That recognition has driven a deliberate move towards explicit numbers-based language and a more disciplined lexicon to reduce ambiguity and prevent misinterpretation.

However the assessed probability is expressed, it is unlikely to be high enough to persuade a jury, but it is more than enough to justify government action when the cost of inaction outweighs risky inaction.

The expulsion of the Iranian ambassador illustrates this calculus. If Iranian officials intimidate Australians, that is a crime. In court, prosecutors would have to prove it beyond a reasonable doubt. But in terms of protecting sovereignty and security, and signalling to Tehran, waiting for a courtroom verdict would be reckless. When intelligence assessments indicate a strong probability of state-directed intimidation, and the balance of probabilities supports that conclusion, decisive diplomatic action becomes not only justified but essential.

That contrast is clear when set against the Australian Federal Police's recent use of criminal law to arrest and charge an individual with foreign interference. In that context, investigators will need to marshal admissible evidence—documents, communications, witness testimony—that can withstand the scrutiny of open

court and persuade a jury beyond reasonable doubt. The higher bar is proper: the criminal law carries the gravest consequences, including deprivation of liberty.

By comparison, diplomatic expulsions or administrative sanctions rely on intelligence assessments and probabilities, enabling the government to act quickly to protect sovereignty even where courtroom-standard proof is not yet available.

Each of these standards embodies a value. The criminal law bar protects liberty. The civil law threshold strikes a balance between efficiency and fairness. Intelligence estimates acknowledge uncertainty to protect the nation from surprise and harm. Taken together, they form an ecosystem of decision-making that ensures both justice and security.

The Iranian case shows why this discipline matters. Democracies need to be able to act on intelligence-driven probabilities to defend sovereignty while still upholding the highest burden of proof in the courts. The maths is different, the language is different, but the end is the same: safeguarding both justice and security in an increasingly uncertain world.

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State-sponsored antisemitism on Australian soil: why Australia's response matters

Justin Bassi and James Corera

Yesterday's announcement that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had directed at least two antisemitic attacks in Australia confirmed that foreign regimes are interfering in our societies. They're doing it not just to illegally protect their domestic interests but to divide our nation.

As the government expelled Iran's ambassador in response, Director-General of Security Mike Burgess told us the IRGC was behind attacks on the Adass Israel Synagogue in Melbourne and on Lewis' Continental Kitchen in Sydney. These were not random acts of hate. They were deliberate operations designed to intimidate

Australia's Jewish community and fracture Australian society from within.

Iran was exporting its ideological hatred and violence to our streets.

This combination of terrorism and foreign interference, while not unprecedented, is more than just the standard national security threat. As Burgess said, 'The IRGC has form in ... going after dissidents or anything they consider a threat to the regime in other countries.' But in this instance its activities amounted to much more. It was, he said, 'having a crack at our social cohesion.'

This is recognition that our open and free society is vulnerable to exploitation by foreign powers—not just Iran, but China and Russia, too—and that security is required not to constrain openness and freedoms but to maintain them.

The government was right to act so decisively. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese made clear Iran's actions would not be tolerated. Foreign Minister Penny Wong confirmed the first expulsion from Australia of an ambassador since World War II. And Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke emphasised the corrosive nature of antisemitism. It matters that we name the crime for what it is. It affirms to Australia's Jewish community they are not alone and calls out the Iran regime's modus operandi in plain terms—vital for a public still uncertain about the impact of hybrid threats that fall short of war.

At the centre of our defence sits the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. Its role here is uniquely complex. Detecting the hand of a foreign intelligence service behind an apparently criminal act requires the fusion of counterespionage, counterterrorism and criminal intelligence. It means following networks where ideology, money, coercion and covert state direction intersect.

Unlike a traditional espionage case, or a standalone terrorist cell, these attacks sat in a grey zone where a state actor outsourced violence to intermediaries who could be disavowed if exposed. Proving that link—tracing how an illicit-tobacco kingpin, an arsonist or a street-level criminal connects back to a general in Tehran—is the kind of invisible work that makes Australians safer yet rarely receives public recognition.

The IRGC has been at this for decades. It has promoted terrorism abroad while sponsoring proxies such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis. Its operatives have been linked to the 2012 bombing of an Israeli diplomat's car in New Delhi, to attempted targeting of Israeli diplomats in Thailand and to an assassination plot against US President Donald Trump. This is a regime skilled at managing crises at home while exporting violence abroad. Similarly, Russia wages conventional war in Ukraine while conducting cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and covert operations across Europe. Both countries thrive on hybrid warfare—blurring lines between soldiers and criminals, terrorists and proxies, influence and intimidation.

So, why us? In part, because our democracy necessarily protects such rights as peaceful protest. Yet at too many rallies in recent months we have seen flags of Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic State and even portraits of Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. Peaceful protest should be defended, but illegal displays of support for terrorist organisations cannot be excused as free expression. For Iran, these displays revealed a vulnerability in our society, an opportunity that it could exploit.

This is why the government's announcement that the IRGC will be listed as a terrorist organisation is necessary. Canada, the US, Sweden, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have already taken that step, while Britain is moving to legislate new powers. Aligning with partners on this makes Australia a harder target and signals to Tehran its behaviour carries real consequences.

That these activities involve both foreign interference and terrorism should not be underplayed. An inquiry into the definition of terrorism is underway, raising the possibility, for example, that damaging property will no longer count. The risk is that diluting the definition in such ways will allow terrorists to get away with lesser criminal charges, such as arson.

The decisions to expel the ambassador and list the IRGC will have diplomatic consequences. Australia has maintained an embassy in Tehran since the 1960s, and its announced closure, which will be at least temporary, will limit Australia's ability to help individuals and influence the region. But the decision is prudent. The risk of arbitrary detention of Australians in Iran has long been high, as

illustrated by the wrongful imprisonment of Australian-British academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert from 2018 to 2020. The benefits of diplomatic presence can never justify tolerating state-sponsored terror and interference against our communities.

From these divisive and dangerous acts, the unifying message is clear both for Australians and our work with allies: hybrid warfare is not just a problem for Europe and the Middle East. It is here, now, in Australia. It looks like antisemitic violence in Melbourne. It looks like arson in Sydney. It is a hostile state trying to divide Australians against each other. And national measures combined with international collective action is required to counter it.

By unpicking the IRGC's modus operandi—its use of proxies, criminals and covert intimidation—Australia has shown its own community and allies and partners the clear and present danger of hybrid threats and how they need to be confronted. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation has made visible the invisible, and the government's swift response has sent the right messages: Australia is not a soft target; state-sponsored interference will be met with resolve; and our democracy is strong enough to defend all its people and their freedoms—whether of faith or, indeed, no faith.

But strength at home is measured not only in deterrence but also in cohesion. As Burke reminded us, Australians of Iranian heritage must not be scapegoated for the actions of a hostile regime. Protecting Australia means standing firm against foreign interference while ensuring every community knows they belong. Security without cohesion is fragile. Security with cohesion is unbreakable.

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3

Australia's domestic landscape

Australia's security architecture must evolve, not regress

Justin Bassi



Image: Social Estate/Unsplash

The Independent Intelligence Review, publicly released last Friday, was inoffensive and largely supported the intelligence community status quo. But it was also largely quiet on the challenges facing the broader national security community in an increasingly dangerous world, in which traditional intelligence is just one tool of statecraft and national power.

After the January discovery of a caravan laden with explosives in Dural, Sydney, confusion emerged around what federal and state governments knew and when. The review was completed before the caravan was discovered, and the plot was likely beyond the review's scope. However, government responses to the event should prompt a discussion about Australia's national security architecture.

Australia faces an unprecedented convergence of threats. We are confronted simultaneously by the rise of aggressive authoritarian powers, global conflict, persistent and evolving terrorism, foreign interference and the normalisation of cyber warfare.

Luck will not protect us; we need structure and certainty. Australia saw these threats early and began to modernise its security architecture in 2017, including the establishment of the Home Affairs portfolio.

But the government has gradually reversed some elements of the consolidation, returning various security responsibilities to the Attorney-General's portfolio, including for the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. This reversion to an outdated model risks leaving the system ill-equipped to confront the challenges of the 21st century.

Debate on Home Affairs seems fixated on the leadership style of its former head, Michael Pezzullo. Leadership is crucial, but obsession with individual style over substance distracts from both strategic thinking and the fundamental issue of resurrecting a system that had structural inadequacies and was demonstrably unfit for purpose. We are not simply revisiting a past model; we are resurrecting a failed one.

The Attorney-General's portfolio, in its traditional guise, was designed for a simpler, less dangerous era. Domestic threats were minimal and tended to come one by one—for example, after the end of the Cold War, security focus shifted from espionage to the emerging threat of Islamist terrorism. The Attorney-General's oversight was appropriate, as it focused primarily on the legal framework while security agencies executed operations.

However, the proliferation and intersection of modern threats have overwhelmed this antiquated model.

When confronted with asylum-seeker boat arrivals, global terrorism, China and hybrid threats including cyber, the previous system—notwithstanding highly talented people—struggled as the Attorney-General's portfolio held both the legal and security responsibilities.

The system's limitations were evident well before the 2017 restructure. In 2011, prime minister Julia Gillard moved cybersecurity from the Attorney-General's purview into her own department. Similarly, the 2012 review of illegal boat arrival policy was managed within the prime minister's department, reflecting that the framework was not up to the task. And as a result of a review after the 2014 Martin Place terrorist attack, the Abbott government created a Counterterrorism Coordinator within the prime minister's portfolio.

The rise of the Islamic State terrorist group in 2014 exposed policy deficits. While terror laws rightly fell under the Attorney-General's remit, the broader policy response demanded a more strategic perspective and decisive

approach. Changes were needed, partly because laws were so out of date.

But it was China's rise that finally revealed the urgent need for a dedicated focus on national security policy. The 2016 review into foreign interference was a direct consequence of Australia's evolving threat landscape.

Few of our closest partners' chief law officers also function as security ministers. Typically, a dedicated security minister focuses on threat assessment and policy development, while the Attorney-General ensures that all actions are lawful.

Australia's Home Affairs model strengthened the legal checks and balances by separating security policy and operational functions from the legal oversight function. It ensured that a single minister could not simultaneously identify a threat, determine the appropriate response and authorise the necessary actions without independent scrutiny. The previous system essentially allowed a single minister to mark their own homework.

Dividing security responsibilities between the Attorney-General and Home Affairs portfolios limits the effectiveness of both departments.

If this gradual dilution portends a future abolition of Home Affairs altogether, that would be a mistake. As the Dural caravan controversy unfolded, no one seemed able to agree on what was an appropriate amount of information-sharing between police and security agencies, and state and federal governments. This underscores the need for clarity that Home Affairs is responsible for setting, coordinating and implementing national security policy.

Home Affairs was created because the threat environment was evolving and, within our national security architecture, foreign and defence policy were covered but the third aspect of national security—domestic security—was lacking. So, what security evolution has justified its regression? The Attorney-General's department has not shown itself to be more capable than Home Affairs in terrorism, cybersecurity or foreign interference.

Home Affairs—to the government's credit—led the world by banning DeepSeek from government devices. Could we count on such decisive action if lawyers were doing all the work and then reviewing it themselves? Would you allow your lawyer to run your business, rather than provide essential legal counsel?

Technology amplifies threats and is advancing much faster than new laws can be written. Terrorists use encrypted apps to plot attacks and social media to attract recruits. China spreads propaganda through social media and has already begun using cyber intrusions to prepare to conduct sabotage operations in future conflict.

Australia must not only reinstate the separation between the security minister and the attorney-general; it must evolve further to confront 21st-century threats. This should include establishing a National Security Council or Secretariat, like those of many of our partner nations, including Quad countries. This body should be led by a national security adviser who provides strategic coherence and policy coordination.

To navigate the increasingly complex and dangerous global security landscape, we need to evolve, not regress.

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Australia's quiet counterterrorism wins are being missed. That's a problem

John Coyne, Henry Campbell and Justin Bassi

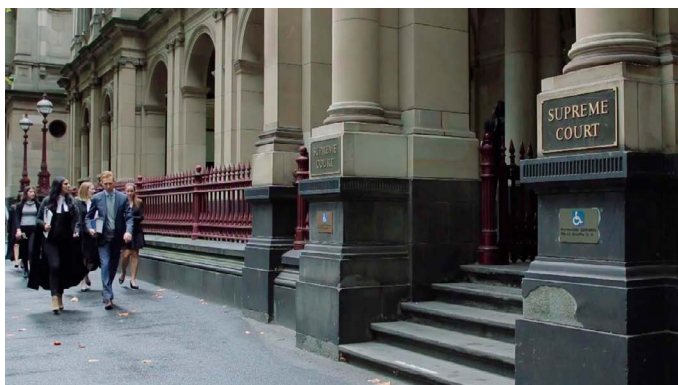


Image: Supreme Court

In early April, Victorian Supreme Court Justice James Elliot **ruled** that Abdul Nacer Benbrika—Australia's most notorious terrorist and the architect of a planned mass-casualty attack on the Melbourne Cricket Ground in 2005—continued to pose an 'unacceptable risk' to Australians.

Yet this ruling generated almost no media coverage or political commentary.

Australians live in one of the safest countries in the world, but they are vulnerable to a profound misperception: that terrorism is either a thing of the past or a threat that only matters in moments of crisis. It's easy to see why when updates to major terrorist cases such as Benbrika's receive little public attention. Selective national attention undermines our understanding of risk, our confidence in the government, and our preparedness for a persistent and evolving challenge.

Australia's National Terrorism Threat Level remains at Probable. In other words, credible intelligence indicates that individuals or groups have the intent and capability to conduct a terrorist attack in Australia. Yet counterterrorism barely features in political discourse or media headlines unless there's blood on the pavement.

Elliot determined that while Benbrika appears to have adopted a non-violent ideology, any apparent change is recent and fragile. There is still a risk that Benbrika may radicalise others to religiously inspired violence.

Notably, the court placed further restrictions on Benbrika through a new extended supervision order (ESO), aiming to improve community safety and facilitate his rehabilitation. This demonstrated our comprehensive counterterrorism system at work.

The media silence speaks volumes. In an era when the threat of terrorism has become more diffuse but no less real, the absence of meaningful public engagement is a dangerous gap in national security strategy. Australia must not only manage terrorism—it must do so visibly and explain its counterterrorism actions.

Since 2000, Australia has developed one of the world's most robust and nuanced counterterrorism systems. Few nations have evolved such a sophisticated toolkit from legislative frameworks to operational coordination. This system enables post-sentencing controls such as continuing detention orders (CDOs) and ESOs—extraordinary legal mechanisms designed to manage high-risk terrorist offenders. But their use is rarely explained to the public, leaving them hidden in the bureaucratic background.

That's a mistake. When it comes to maintaining community confidence, perception matters. If the public only hears about terrorism during moments of tragedy or controversy, fear is reinforced and trust is eroded.

Communicating security successes, like the most recent ESO against Benbrika, helps build national resilience.

Post-sentencing controls are not punitive tools used recklessly. They are evidence-based, court-approved measures governed by rigorous legal thresholds. In Benbrika's case, the state has applied a CDO and multiple ESOs since 2020. These measures reflect a cold truth—some offenders may not deradicalise, or at least not in the timeframe required to ensure public safety.

The most recent ESO, imposed on 8 April, followed a disturbing pattern of behaviour. Despite earlier psychological assessments suggesting progress, Benbrika's communications—uncovered through police surveillance—told a different story. Police uncovered conversations with extremist associates; discussions of blasphemy, bullets and declaring others as infidels; and evidence that Benbrika had deliberately deceived his caseworkers. These all revealed a calculated attempt to mask continued radical intent.

While complicated by issues of due process, psychologist Andrew Ellis's analysis concluded that a risk management approach, including an ESO, surveillance and an extended firearm prohibition order, remained necessary to address the risks Benbrika posed.

The Australian Federal Police provided evidence in court, including Benbrika's communications with criminal offender Joshua Clavell, his former co-conspirator Aimen Joud, and extremist preacher Wissam Haddad. The AFP findings were particularly damning and demonstrated the ongoing national security risks.

The system is precisely designed to combine expert assessment and surveillance evidence—layering intelligence, expertise and legal oversight to ensure that liberty is only restricted when justified.

But this sophisticated response drew little attention. There was no ministerial press release, no media explanation of how Australia's system protected the public without breaching human rights, and no effort to reaffirm to Australians that their safety is underpinned by one of the most mature counterterrorism regimes in the world.

This matters because public safety is both real and perceived. If Australians are unaware of the capabilities quietly protecting them, they are more likely to feel

vulnerable and susceptible to panic during hoaxes or misinformation events, such as the Dural caravan case in January.

Australia doesn't need to just manage terrorism; it needs to explain how it does so. The Attorney-General's Department, state governments and political leaders must start telling these stories—not to breed fear but to build trust. The aim is not to politicise terrorism, but to create awareness that the system is functioning, adaptive and focused on prevention.

This communication gap is not new, but it is widening. The Wakeley church stabbing in April 2024 was a rare moment where the public was forced to reckon with the enduring reality of extremist violence. In contrast, legal decisions such as Benbrika's ESO go unnoticed, even though they reflect pre-emptive, legally sound and publicly beneficial action.

Australia's counterterrorism strategy must go beyond intelligence and law enforcement to include strategic communication. When orders such as ESOs and CDOs are implemented, authorities should explain why the decision was made, how the process protects civil liberties and what it says about the evolving threat landscape.

We have the legislative architecture and the operational capability. We now need the political courage to speak to the public—not only when things go wrong, but also when they go right. Politicians and officials responsible for counterterrorism should be transparent with the Australian public. They should clearly communicate the threat that actors such as Benbrika pose, while also providing confidence that countermeasures are in place.

Because the next time we face a real terrorist threat, it will not be enough to have done the work behind closed doors. The public must already believe that the system works, that the threat is being managed, and that national security is a shared responsibility—not a last-minute scramble.

If we fail to tell that story now, we risk losing the public's trust when it matters most.

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Reuniting ASIO and the AFP under Home Affairs is the right move to address intensifying threats

James Corera and John Coyne



Image: Marcus Reubenstein/Unsplash

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s decision to return policy responsibility for the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and the Australian Federal Police to the Department of Home Affairs is more than a machinery-of-government change; it’s a long-term strategic recalibration in response to a rapidly intensifying threat landscape.

The move, previously [advocated](#) by ASPI executive director Justin Bassi, lays the foundation for a more integrated and future-ready national security system that can address the complex interplay between societal resilience and statecraft. In doing so, it matches the threats that confront Australia and effectively puts an end to the perception that Home Affairs is owned by one side of politics. In national security, a bipartisan approach to governing architecture is vital for public confidence, even where policies may divide.

The reform responds to a clear signal sent by the director-general of security’s 2025 [Annual Threat Assessment](#): that several of the organisation’s ‘heads of security’ are flashing red, and more could soon follow. The convergence of foreign interference, cyber intrusions, espionage, terrorism and transnational crime demands a whole-of-nation response. These are no longer discrete risks to be managed by siloed agencies; they are networked threats that exploit cracks between institutions and jurisdictions.

The so-called [caravan incident](#)—a bomb hoax in Sydney in January that triggered a large-scale counterterrorism response—made those cracks visible to the public.

Although it was a false alarm, the event revealed systemic weaknesses in cross-jurisdictional coordination. Communication and command-and-control arrangements faltered at critical moments.

The decision to move ASIO and the AFP back to Home Affairs was a response to these past shortcomings, as acknowledged by the prime minister. But the decision also reflects a forward-leaning posture that better positions us for future crises by recalibrating how we define and deliver national security.

The rationale for creating the Home Affairs portfolio in 2017 remains valid: Australia had a coherent foreign and defence policy architecture but lacked the same level of domestic integration. However, in 2025, challenges no longer relate only to domestic security. Whether it’s youth radicalisation, cyber-enabled foreign interference or coordinated attacks on democratic institutions, these problems cannot be solved by intelligence collection or law-enforcement action alone. They are societal challenges.

ASPI analysts have consistently argued that we cannot arrest our way to social cohesion, nor spy our way to reduced radicalisation. The spread of extremist ideology online, the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions and the exploitation of social and economic vulnerabilities all point to a need for a security architecture that is integrated not only across operational agencies but across policy departments and sectors. Education, online regulation, community services, migration policy, economic development and democratic integrity are now inextricably linked to national security outcomes.

Over the past two decades, ASIO, the AFP and state and territory police forces have built deep mutual respect and cooperation at tactical and operational levels. These relationships are now embedded in culture, not just protocol. But while operational trust is strong, strategic alignment remains uneven. Successful national-level integration requires a federal policy owner that fosters the same level of cohesion across policy and coordination functions. It must be backed by clear governance, empowered leadership and a mandate that reinforces collaboration rather than assumes it.

In this context, the institutional boundaries of Home Affairs matter deeply. Machinery-of-government changes will certainly take time to operationalise. The disbanding

of Home Affairs' intelligence division under the previous administrative settings hindered the department's ability to convert intelligence feeds into coherent policy advice. The announced reform rebuilds that bridge between national security operations and strategic policymaking.

In doing so, it gives effect to Home Affairs' 2024 Independent Capability Review, which warns against the dangers of reactive, crisis-driven leadership. The review calls for the development of foresight capabilities, stronger internal coherence and improved integration with the broader machinery of government. In response, Secretary of Home Affairs Stephanie Foster committed the department to a more forward-leaning, strategically aligned model of leadership. Since then, the department has initiated reforms to embed a clear strategic purpose across its functions, build advanced foresight capabilities and enhance whole-of-government integration.

These include:

- Establishing structures to anticipate and prepare for emerging threats, rather than merely responding to existing ones;
- Advancing partnerships with industry, community organisations and other levels of government to build a unified security ecosystem; and
- Aligning disparate operational and policy units under a single strategic direction to better coordinate law enforcement, protective security, cyber, immigration and cohesion functions.

Rebuilding strategic capability is one half of the equation. The other half is political leadership. Australia's national security not only demands capable intelligence professionals; it requires ministers who can lead from the front. The appointment of Minister for Home Affairs Tony Burke to oversee ASIO and the AFP, on top of his portfolios in Cyber Security, Immigration, Citizenship, and the Arts, signals a recognition that contemporary security challenges defy old silos. Burke has a good track record in high-pressure portfolios and strong political authority within cabinet, positioning him as a minister with the bandwidth and weight to drive reform across competing agendas. His portfolio mix reflects that social cohesion, migration policy, cultural identity and cyber resilience are now core aspects of national security, not peripheral concerns.

In a world of converging, escalating threats, the fragmentation of domestic security activities is an untenable liability. Returning ASIO and the AFP to the Home Affairs portfolio is necessary, timely and grounded in operational experience and strategic foresight. But to be meaningful, it must go beyond the symbolic. It must address deep structural vulnerabilities, restore lost capability and operationalise a whole-of-nation vision for security.

That means positioning Home Affairs as the federal government's strategic coordinator for national security policy, supported by a restored intelligence division, strengthened internal capability and a clear mandate to tackle both immediate threats and the underlying societal drivers of insecurity. Crucially, this must be exercised in genuine partnership with the states and territories and must be enabled by a minister who can lead from the front and work effectively across disparate portfolios. National security cannot be imposed from Canberra; it must be built collaboratively with those on the front lines of implementation. With bipartisan backing, the momentum of an independent review, and the leadership of a minister with the political weight to drive reform, the opportunity is real.

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A Bondi royal commission would let the intelligence community speak, and expose some polite fictions

Chris Taylor

As the first public figure to [call](#) for a royal commission into the Bondi atrocity, I initially thought making that case was redundant. Surely the federal government would act quickly along those lines? After all, how could there not be a royal commission following the worst terrorist attack on Australian soil?

Yet, three weeks on, despite public clamour, the government's officially unmoved. It has instead thrown its weight behind a New South Wales state royal commission and an internal inquiry by former bureaucrat Dennis Richardson.

The former course doesn't match a national security incident occasioned by national factors. It's telling that the New South Wales government has still not said exactly what's proposed, evidently hoping Canberra changes its mind soon. Ideally the prime minister would convene a joint royal commission with New South Wales to fully empower the resulting inquiry's dealings with all relevant agencies (including state police) and ministers across jurisdictional boundaries.

As for the Richardson review, it's only fair to note that internal inquiries are common when examining the intelligence community. Examples include the regular independent intelligence reviews carried out since the recommendation of the 2004 Flood Inquiry, itself an internal government response to the intelligence failure before the Iraq War of 2003. So too inquiries carried out by the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security. But in other instances, intelligence-related matters of acute public and political relevance have been examined in public—most famously in the case of the Second Hope Royal Commission's 'reference (c)' concerning the 1983 Combe-Ivanov affair. This included the very public examination of then prime minister Bob Hawke on the advice he received from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and actions he took in response.

Government insistence that issues such as antisemitism can be considered by Richardson isn't a fair reflection of the review's narrow [terms of reference](#). Most importantly, 'who knew what, when' ignores the fact that, when it comes to countering terrorism, police and intelligence agencies are simply the cap on a volatile bottle. What matters most is what's bubbling within.

Far from allowing police and the intelligence community to escape scrutiny (or reflecting agencies' self-interests), as some cynics suggest, favouring an internal inquiry over a royal commission, the highest form of official inquiry in Australia, serves instead to gag national security leaders. As a result, unpalatable truths—including that security intelligence can only partly mitigate threats created by decades of conscious and unconscious policies and attitudes (including failing to prioritise national unity over division)—cannot be aired publicly.

In this regard it's important to understand that authorities are constantly evaluating—at specific points in time—capabilities and intentions of people of security concern.

Unfortunately, there are many people in Australia who have an intention to do harm—ranging from worrying beliefs to dedicated commitments to violence. And those people have greatly varying capabilities to act on those intentions.

Because of the sheer range, there's constant triaging and prioritisation to stay on top of the problem and necessarily focus investigative and surveillance resources. This is why we can't just rely on agencies and police to always get judgments right. As a nation we need to reduce the number of people with worrying intent—by actively changing attitudes but also by limiting entry of (and if here already and not citizens, removing) those with beliefs unwelcome in Australia.

It's important that ASIO and others have the opportunity to explain publicly (without prejudicing their work) how they deal with these challenges and make assessments in these circumstances. Circumstances that include the national terror threat level having been raised to 'probable' in August 2024. It's too easy for such a term to lose impact. 'Probable' means a 'greater than fifty per cent chance of an onshore attack or attack planning in the next twelve months'. Chillingly, that's a coin flip. And while this doesn't mean there shouldn't be a robust, informed examination of what was done or not done by agencies before 14 December, it does give a realistic sense of the threat being faced.

I believe this is why a broad-ranging royal commission is being opposed. In my view, many opponents fear senior officials being questioned publicly along the following lines:

Q: How many persons of interest similar to the Bondi terrorists (that is, people who have come to past attention of authorities via expressed extremist intentions, associations but have not hitherto demonstrated significant capability to act) are there?

A: Very, very many. Many more than the Australian public presently understands.

Q: And how many of those persons can you ensure don't acquire that capability, even if you devoted all your resources to this one task, ignoring all the other pressing security challenges faced by Australia?

A: A fraction of that total.

Completely understandably, the public response would be outrage: ‘How on Earth did Australia—Australia!—end up here?’

Neo-nazis are rightly despised. Ever more restrictive gun laws attract easy electoral support. But, after Bondi, in the interests of national security and justice, and indeed sustainable social cohesion, we can no longer live with tenuous polite fictions obfuscating the more profound national security consequences of *laissez faire* immigration settings absent proactive national integration, and the coddling of political extremism and violence since 7 October 2023.

Relying on the Richardson Review in these circumstances is like responding to a city-wide arson spree with an inquiry into whether fire hoses are too short. Maybe they are. But maybe you should also do something about the arson.

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After Bondi, we crave certainty—but quick fixes are dangerous

John Coyne

Australians want answers and reassurance. They want to believe that tragedy could have been prevented if only someone had acted differently. Politics amplifies that instinct, demanding decisive action, new laws and visible accountability. But when outrage rather than evidence drives the response, the result is often policy theatre: expensive, symbolic measures that feel decisive but do little to improve safety.

Blame-hunting hysterics and rage-baiting serve a nation poorly. They collapse complex security systems into simplistic villains and they reward hindsight certainty over serious analysis. Worse still is the rush to quick-fire policy development untethered from evidence—legislative and regulatory changes designed to signal action rather than solve problems. Such responses may calm public anxiety in the short term, but they rarely make Australia safer.

One of the hardest truths to accept after terrorist attacks such as that at Bondi on 14 December is how misleading hindsight can be. Looking back, it seems clear that some

obvious intervention was needed. ‘Why didn’t they act?’ The question feels compelling.

But prevention doesn’t work that way.

After the fact, certain details inevitably loom larger. Travel patterns that now raise concern seem self-evident. Associations that appear marginal suddenly feel decisive. Yet before the attack, authorities would have needed to cast an exponentially wider net, covering individuals with extremist views, those previously assessed by intelligence agencies, their families and their associates, to detect a single person of concern. That approach generates vast numbers of false positives: people who trigger suspicion but who pose no genuine threat.

Reporting by *The Sydney Morning Herald* has revealed that intelligence agencies were not blind to extremist risk in the abstract. ASIO had previously advised NSW Police that [Naveed Akram](#) had associated with Islamic extremists years before his father, Sajid, had been granted a firearms licence—and long before they took his six legally owned guns to Bondi, fatally shooting 15 people and injuring dozens more. Police, for their part, had long been alert to the possibility that Sydney-based street preachers with Islamic State [links](#) might seek indirect access to weapons by targeting licensed gun owners with no criminal or security flags—so-called [cleanskins](#). These concerns were real, documented and debated well before Bondi.

Acknowledging that awareness existed isn’t the same as demonstrating that a decisive or lawful intervention was available at the time. Intelligence warnings about associations are rarely binary; they signal elevated concern, not criminal intent. Converting them into licence refusals, detention or surveillance requires legal thresholds that are deliberately high. When those thresholds are lowered in the aftermath of an attack, systems inevitably generate more false positives.

The practical effect was visible days after Bondi, when seven young Muslim men were taken into custody under heightened security settings. Acting at a lower risk threshold enabled precautionary intervention, but the absence of evidence sufficient to sustain charges meant the men had to be released. This is precisely how a system behaves when it trades precision for speed.

That example raises uncomfortable questions about why rapid regulatory changes are now being pushed through

with limited analysis, when existing laws appear adequate but imperfectly applied. It also underscores the social cost of operating permanently at heightened thresholds.

Expanding the security net inevitably draws in people who pose no genuine threat, over time eroding trust, co-operation and social cohesion. Bondi, in this sense, exposes not a single missed warning but a structural dilemma: lower thresholds may feel safer, but they often make systems noisier, less effective and ultimately less legitimate.

Each false positive consumes time, resources and attention. Each additional warning sign that is looked for risks overwhelming the system and diverting focus from more credible risks. This isn't a failure of will or competence. It is a structural reality of risk management in open societies.

Modern terrorism exploits precisely these conditions. It is rarely hierarchical, predictable or linear. Lone actors radicalise through diffuse online ecosystems rather than formal organisations. Ideological influence crosses borders without travel. Violence incubates where grievance, criminality, mental health stressors and extremist narratives intersect. Responsibility for managing these risks is dispersed among agencies, jurisdictions and levels of government that were never designed to function as a single, seamless system.

Intelligence reflects this complexity. It is probabilistic, incomplete and often ambiguous, built from fragments that appear coherent only once violence has already occurred. Policing operates within deliberate legal and ethical constraints that privilege civil liberties over omniscience. Expecting either system to deliver perfect foresight is not a serious standard of accountability; it is a retrospective fantasy.

None of this means failure should be excused. But it does mean failure must be understood properly. What is often labelled an 'intelligence failure' or a 'policing failure' is more accurately a systems failure: a mismatch between how contemporary risk behaves and how our institutions are designed to detect, share and manage it.

The danger after Bondi isn't only that we ask the wrong questions but that we answer them too quickly. Symbolic policymaking may reassure anxious electorates, but it rarely improves security outcomes. At best, it costs money

and buys false confidence. At worst, it introduces new vulnerabilities, distorts operational priorities and makes already complex systems harder to manage.

Accountability, if it's to mean anything, must be architectural rather than punitive. Reviews, inquiries and even royal commissions add value only if they are disciplined in scope and clear in purpose: to identify structural weaknesses, improve information flows and strengthen risk management. Performed poorly, they risk becoming expensive exercises in reassurance that deliver neither safety nor trust.

There is also a temptation, after attacks such as Bondi, to promise absolute security. That temptation should be resisted. No open society can guarantee perfect safety without eroding the freedoms that terrorism seeks to undermine. The real task is harder and more important: building adaptive systems capable of operating under uncertainty, learning continuously rather than episodically, and strengthening social resilience alongside security capability.

Terrorism isn't only an attack on lives, it is also an attack on confidence—confidence in institutions, in social trust and in the idea that democracies can remain both secure and free. If Bondi becomes just another episode of blame followed by forgetfulness, we'll have failed ourselves. If instead it becomes a catalyst for serious, evidence-based reform, Australia may yet emerge stronger and more resilient.

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Bondi terror: don't scapegoat the people who keep us safe

John Coyne



Image: Kiros Amin/Unsplash

In the days after Sunday night's terrorist attack at Bondi Beach, a familiar pattern has emerged. Shock gives way to grief. Grief turns into questions. And questions, inevitably, become accusations. How did this happen? Who failed? Who didn't do their job?

Because this was a terrorist attack, the blowtorch has now been turned on Australia's police and intelligence agencies. That scrutiny is understandable. Scrutiny is also necessary in a liberal democracy. But it must be informed by some uncomfortable truths about how intelligence, policing and risk actually work.

The first truth is the nature of intelligence itself. Intelligence isn't a crystal ball. It's more like being handed four or five pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, at best, without the picture on the box, without knowing how many pieces exist, and being asked to describe the full image. Analysts must make judgements based on fragmentary information, uncertainty and probability. After an attack, when the picture is suddenly complete, everything looks obvious. Beforehand, it rarely is.

That isn't an excuse. It's a reality. Intelligence is an estimative discipline, not a forensic one. It deals in likelihoods, not certainties. Demanding perfect prediction is to demand the impossible.

The second truth is that Australia's police and intelligence agencies have, over the past 25 years, enjoyed extraordinary success. Since 9/11, Australia has disrupted dozens of terrorist plots and prevented mass-casualty

attacks. We've suffered tragedy, but not on the scale seen in parts of Europe, nor with the grim regularity experienced in North America. Quietly and consistently, Australian agencies have performed at a level that's the envy of partners in Britain, France, Germany, Canada and elsewhere.

Success, however, has consequences. Because Australians don't routinely experience terrorism, many no longer feel it as a threat. It fades into abstraction, something that happens overseas, not at home.

That perception is increasingly divorced from reality. The Taliban are back in control of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have re-established their space and freedom of movement. Islamic State remains active from Libya to Syria and across parts of Africa. In Southeast Asia, too, such groups continue to operate—for example, Abu Sayyaf in the southern Philippines and East Malaysia. At home, Australia faces a diverse array of violent extremism: some Islamic-inspired, others right-wing extremists, white nationalists, anti-authority movements, antisemitic networks and ideologically motivated lone actors.

All of this is occurring against the backdrop of the most strategically uncertain period since at least the 1930s. Great-power competition, foreign interference, cyber operations, climate-driven instability, conflict in Ukraine and Gaza, and social polarisation are interacting in ways that amplify risk. Terrorism doesn't exist in isolation; it feeds off this wider volatility.

From more than three decades working alongside Australia's national security community, I know this much: police and intelligence agencies are relentlessly focused on protecting the public. But they must prioritise. They cannot be everywhere, watching everyone, all the time. Governments can always spend more on security, but every additional dollar comes at the expense of health, education or social services. Those trade-offs are political decisions, not operational failures.

There's another constraint that matters as much. Australia is a liberal democracy. Our agencies are responsible for investigating terrorism and politically motivated violence, not policing thought. Planning or carrying out terrorist violence is illegal; holding extremist views isn't. I despise those views, but I value deeply the freedom that allows

them to exist without the state becoming omnipresent and coercive.

For more than a year, ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess has assessed the terrorism threat as ‘probable’. He was criticised by some for overstatement. Yet the threat was probable on Sunday afternoon, and it remains probable today. That assessment was not alarmism; it was realism.

There’ll be hard questions to answer.

In issuing a gun license, did the NSW police properly use firearms-registry information about links between the applicant and any household member with extremist affiliations?

Should the offenders’ travel to the Philippines have triggered reassessment of the offender with the firearm licence and the threat that the two men posed, and was that information visible to and acted upon by relevant authorities? This goes to whether travel intelligence, risk indicators and licensing frameworks were sufficiently integrated to reassess ‘fit and proper person’ status for license holders and ensure that access to firearms remained appropriately constrained as risk profiles evolved.

Those questions must be answered, but calmly and based on evidence.

And we need to wait. We need to establish who knew what and when.

Australia’s response must now move beyond reactive blame to systemic accountability. The Bondi attack has exposed potential weaknesses in how information flows between intelligence agencies, state police, and administrative systems such as firearms registries. A Royal Commission could examine not just what went wrong in this case but how our fragmented risk frameworks can be integrated to prevent similar failures in an era where ideology, technology, and access to weapons are increasingly intertwined.

Above all, we need to remember that for Australia’s police and intelligence officers this attack has landed as a hammer blow. And tomorrow, and the day after, they’ll return to work confronting an enduring threat, on behalf of all of us.

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Bondi terror: when we ask the wrong questions after violence

James Corera and John Coyne

As naturally occurs after public violence such as the 14 December Bondi Beach terror attack, we crave clarity. Media outlets search for a single, definitive answer that might impose order on shock and loss. In Australia, that question is usually the same: was the attacker known to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation? This time we’ve seen the scrutiny also go further to retrospective examination of staffing levels and years-old resourcing decisions.

In a liberal democracy, it’s right that institutions entrusted with extraordinary powers should be accountable, particularly when violence erupts in public spaces. But for it to be effective, accountability needs to be informed and not based on a misunderstanding.

Counterterrorism is not just an intelligence problem; it’s a societal one. Prevention depends on political leadership that resists equivocation; media that frames violence with care and context; platforms that enforce standards consistently; and, vitally, communities empowered to intervene early. By the time intelligence agencies are involved, prevention has already narrowed sharply—leaving only disruption as their task.

Asking questions of what was known to whom and when is an understandable impulse—and to some extent necessary and prudent. They offer certainty. In a society saturated with information, urgency and noise, they allow us to move quickly past discomfort and resume the rhythms of daily life. But in exclusively focussing on those questions, we risk diverting attention from the deeper, harder questions that demand time, reflection and collective honesty—especially in this instance.

The more pressing questions are how violent extremism develops in a multicultural democracy such as Australia, and how antisemitism has been allowed to fester in plain sight. These are the questions Australia’s Jewish community deserve answered. But they matter not just

to Australia's Jewish community but to us all, because the answers are what will really prevent future such violence targeting any segment of our society.

Intelligence assessments are not permanent verdicts; they are point-in-time judgements of individuals made with finite information, finite resources and legal thresholds that rightly limit extraordinary powers.

Individuals move in and out of intelligence focus as their circumstances, behaviours and motivations change. An individual who does not meet a terrorism threshold today may do so tomorrow—or never. And the reverse is also possible. Absence of interest in someone at one moment is not necessarily evidence of negligence. It's the normal operation of a system designed to prioritise the most acute risks.

Expecting intelligence agencies to predict individual acts of violence misunderstands their role. Intelligence manages risk, not inevitability. To demand foreknowledge is to ask intelligence agencies to abandon proportionality and civil rights in favour of pre-crime surveillance, something Australians have never accepted—and shouldn't.

The focus on whether someone was 'known' also narrows our field of vision. It encourages us to see violence as the product of one person's pathology rather than the outcome of a broader social process.

Violent extremism rarely begins with violence. It more often begins with a deeply personal sense of grievance, mis-identity and moral justification. It grows especially in environments where hateful ideas are normalised, excused or tolerated. It accelerates when individuals come to believe that their anger is shared or validated. This is not necessarily an intelligence or policing problem. Instead, it's a societal challenge.

Motivations for terrorists evolve. They harden. And they can change rapidly.

Some attackers display no fixed ideological identity until late in the process. Personal crisis, global events or perceived social permission can act as unforeseen triggers, compressing years of grievance into weeks of escalation. Digital platforms further accelerate and inflame this dynamic, collapsing distance and reinforcing prejudice. Lone-actor violence—or violence carried out by a small, closed group, as in this case of a father and son—often

appears coherent only in retrospect, once fragmented and concealed behaviours are retrospectively assembled into a narrative of intent.

This means an individual not on the radar months earlier may cross a threshold suddenly—not because intelligence failed to notice something obvious, but because something unknown changed. Media narratives that focus solely on prior awareness flatten this reality. They replace a dynamic process with a retrospective checklist.

There is another risk in this framing. When every act of violence is treated as an intelligence failure, pressure builds for broader surveillance, longer watch lists and lower thresholds for intervention.

That response may feel reassuring in the moment, but it brings a monetary cost. The funds must come from somewhere—usually at the expense of another public service. When public debate treats every act of violence as proof that security agencies simply need more powers or resources, it distorts priorities, weakens public trust, and blurs the line between suspicion and evidence. Over time, this approach risks making intelligence less effective, not more.

Security agencies should be the last line of defence. When they become the only line we talk about, something downstream has already gone wrong. If we want to prevent violence rather than merely assign blame, we need to all ask harder questions about what we've tolerated as a society.

We should be examining the environments—online and offline—in which hatred is allowed to take root and spread. We should interrogate the social tolerance that allows antisemitic rhetoric to circulate with limited challenge, and we should ask why Jewish community spaces need to operate behind security gates and why schools require armed guards. We should all be paying attention to the early warning signs that appear in schools, workplaces, communities and digital spaces long before anything reaches a security threshold for ASIO or police.

A pluralistic society should tolerate disagreement, protest and political anger. But it can't—and shouldn't—tolerate normalising the dehumanisation of any segment of our society. When those boundaries blur, violence becomes easier to imagine. When silence replaces challenge, some individuals interpret that silence as permission.

Violence is not the beginning of the story. It's the end of one.

If we want to honour the Bondi victims and heroes alike, and reduce the likelihood of recurrence, we should ask not whether someone was known to ASIO but perhaps how hatred has been allowed to harden into something that made violence seem possible at all. That is a more uncomfortable question precisely because it's a question we all need to answer.

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Bondi terror: we'll need a wide-ranging royal commission

Chris Taylor

There's much we don't know, less than 24 hours after the 14 December atrocity at Bondi Beach. But we do know it was the worst terrorist attack ever carried out on Australian soil. It specifically targeted Jewish Australians. It involved at least two people (now understood to be father and son), and they had access to what in Australia would be regarded as high-powered weapons.

The attack, in which the two men shot and killed at least 15 people during a Jewish festival, defiled Bondi Beach, a place sacred in the national imagination. And it came after more than two years of escalating antisemitism and tolerance of associated political violence and disorder in Australia and internationally. A wide-ranging royal commission is needed to examine not just the attack itself but its policy and socio-cultural context.

Australians have been victims of mass casualty terrorist attacks before, the worst at Bali in 2002. There have also been attacks and plots at home, particularly in the ISIS age. Indeed, today is the 11th anniversary of the Lindt Cafe siege. After that outrage, police civilian Curtis Cheng was killed, there was another deadly siege (in suburban Melbourne), the Bourke Street Mall attack, and the murders of an elderly couple, the Antills, in Brisbane five years ago. Each of those events was an act of terrorism.

Yet thanks to effective counter-terrorism investigation and policing (including proactive threat disruption), geography

and relative unavailability of firearms and explosives, Australia had been spared the scale of atrocities committed in the same period in Paris, Brussels, Orlando, Nice, Manchester, Christchurch and elsewhere. Until yesterday evening.

We also know this particular moment is no time for recriminations and second-guessing. What must be a priority is tending to the wounded and bereaved and to the nation's anguish; ensuring no further dangers linked to this vile conspiracy or copycats; and evidence gathering.

That evidence will be important for prosecution and punishment should the second shooter survive. It will also be critical for the national self-reflection to come. Given the atrocity's scale, that will need to be a royal commission, the highest form of official inquiry in Australia. A coronial or other lesser judicial inquiry would not do. As with the second Hope Royal Commission on intelligence agencies (1983 to 1985), considerations and findings could be sequenced and prioritised to deal first and expeditiously with immediate questions concerning the attack before addressing broader questions.

The royal commission should be empowered to minutely examine what led to the attack, the assailants' development of intent and acquisition of capabilities, and the knowledge and actions of security agencies and the police before and during the attack. The latter may well feature the grim reality of perpetrators being known to authorities in some way, given the prolific range of possible terrorism cases that must be constantly triaged and prioritised in a security environment rightly characterised by the director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation as 'flashing red'.

There is already suggestion that one of the Bondi Beach terrorists had a historical association with ISIS sympathisers, although the apparent familial connection suggests that the radicalisation and organisation involved may have had a minimal signature detectable by anyone looking in from the outside. Nonetheless, it will be important to contemplate how systems originally attuned to broader terrorist conspiracies (and more recently to lone actors communicating online) can further evolve to better address such threats.

However, a future royal commission should not be limited to mechanical considerations. It will be imperative to examine the policies and attitudes that brought us to

this place. This was not an act of nature—a bushfire, say, or a flood. It was an outcome of policies, attitudes and actions—inadvertent and deliberate—over the past three decades, and especially since October 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza.

That includes well-intentioned but ultimately misguided approaches to immigration and integration that, in risking what Sir Keir Starmer has in his own national context candidly described as ‘an island of strangers’, have corroded national identity and fellow feeling amongst citizens. There has also been an indulgence of antisemitism and an associated, performatively violent politics in our streets. The extraordinary steps that Jewish Australians have had to take individually and collectively to ensure their community’s security for the past two years should have been a klaxon for their fellow countrymen and women.

If you had told Australians in 1995 that a Chanukah celebration by Bondi Beach would be the scene of a terrorist shooting that left at least 15 innocents dead, they would not only have been appalled but baffled. It would be inconceivable. In Australia? And yet here we are. Antisemitism envoy [Jillian Segal](#) is unerringly correct in this regard: ‘This is not the Australia we know and it cannot be the Australia we accept.’

Australians will be rightly feeling anger along with grief. In this hour we cannot let that anger exacerbate hurt or distract authorities from the work that must be done here and now. But contrary to much well-meant advice, we should not let that anger go. For too long we have allowed tolerance of the intolerable. That has led Australia down a path to the 14 December 2025. A royal commission must be empowered to cut through polite fictions, so not only are we better prepared to prevent and respond to future threats but to ensure the social and cultural conditions in which this twisted evil sprouted are actively undone.

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Bondi terror: attack reinforces the need for security frameworks that manage risk

John Coyne and James Corera

The terror attack at Bondi Beach on Sunday should be understood not only as an act of violence but as a stress test of Australia’s security, social and policy systems.

The immediate danger has passed. The more consequential question is what this event reveals about the community assumptions that have quietly taken hold—and what follows if those assumptions are left unchallenged.

For many Australians, the violence collided with a deeply held belief: that the terror years were behind us, that the period that had justified nearly 25 years of counterterrorism legislation, regulatory oversight, intelligence reform and expanded police powers had closed. While official threat assessments have consistently warned that violence remains probable, public sentiment has arguably drifted towards the view that these frameworks were relics of a different time.

Bondi Beach exposes the fragility of that belief.

Australia’s National Terrorism Threat Level did not change overnight. It remains at ‘Probable’. Over time, the absence of large-scale attacks has fostered an impression for some that the risk has dissipated rather than evolved. In that environment, counterterrorism laws increasingly came to be viewed for some not as risk-management tools, but as constraints—excessive, outdated or no longer proportionate.

That complacency is itself a strategic vulnerability.

Director-General of Security Mike Burgess’s 2025 threat assessment reinforced precisely this point. It reiterated that it would be a mistake to look at contemporary terrorism through a lens made when Islamic State or al-Qaeda had been at their height. You’d get the wrong picture, we were told. Now, attacks are most likely to manifest through small-scale, unpredictable acts by individuals or micro-networks, often accelerated—in days and weeks rather than months and years. Burgess warned that the face, form and motivations of terrorism were now more diverse and complicated.

This means the absence of mass-casualty attacks should not be mistaken for the absence of threat. Rather, the threat is changing—and should be expected to continue to do so.

As ASPI analysts have similarly [argued](#), modern terrorism and violent extremism do not always conform neatly to past templates. Contemporary attacks are frequently carried out by lone actors motivated by grievance, fixation or notoriety, operating at the blurred edges of terrorism, extremism and criminal violence. They exploit openness, speed and visibility. They are difficult to detect and impossible to prevent entirely.

Australia's legislative and regulatory frameworks were never designed to guarantee safety. They exist to manage risk, enable early intervention and limit the scale and frequency of harm. Judging their relevance solely by periods of apparent calm misunderstands both the nature of contemporary threat and the purpose of the systems built to contain it.

Bondi Beach reminds us why those systems remain so vital.

The operational response demonstrated their value. Police—state and federal—acted decisively. Paramedics and other emergency services responded with speed and coordination. There was no cascading failure, no secondary incident and no collapse in public order. These are the products of institutional learning accumulated across decades and incidents, learning that can be eroded if its relevance is forgotten.

But security frameworks don't operate in isolation. The second and more complex contest begins after the incident.

In the hours following the terror attack, familiar dynamics unfolded. Social media accelerated speculation. Misinformation spread faster than verified facts. Some voices rushed to impose meaning, blame or ideological explanation before evidence was available. This has become a central feature of modern crises.

Violence today seeks more than physical harm. It aims to fracture trust, provoke overreaction and reignite divisions societies believe they've moved beyond. When people assume the terror years are over, they're often unprepared

for this second phase—the information and social contest that follows.

This is where restraint matters.

Calls to dismantle long-standing security frameworks in the name of normalisation misunderstand how risk behaves. The absence of attacks isn't proof of the irrelevance of our arrangements; it's often evidence of their quiet effectiveness. Conversely, responding to violence with panic, overreach or performative policy shifts risks validating the very narratives that attackers hope to provoke.

What comes next should therefore be consolidation, not reversal.

First, disciplined public communication as we've seen in the immediate aftermath of the Bondi attack remains central. Having state and federal authorities that continue to provide timely, factual updates without speculation fills an information vacuum that otherwise invites distortion that fuels fear. Clear communication is not a courtesy; it's a security function.

Second, Australia needs to reaffirm the legitimacy of its counterterrorism and public-safety frameworks while remaining open to measured review. Oversight and proportionality matter. So does institutional memory. It's a strategic error to dismantle or hollow out systems built over 25 years.

Third, there's a civic responsibility that cannot be outsourced to government. Australians should continue to actively challenge hate, misinformation, and dehumanising language in all its forms—online and offline. Walking past this behaviour normalises it. Sharing it amplifies it. Democracies are weakened not only by violence, but by disengagement from the norms that contain it.

Finally, leadership matters. Political, media and community leaders should resist the temptation to frame Bondi as evidence that 'everything has changed' or that the system has somehow failed. Such narratives grant the attackers disproportionate strategic impact. The harder task is to acknowledge shock without surrendering perspective.

Australia has faced this challenge before. After previous attacks, it largely chose restraint over reaction and

cohesion over division. That choice preserved social trust and strengthened long-term security.

Bondi should reinforce precisely that lesson. The terror years were never something Australia finished. They evolved. The frameworks built to manage that reality remain necessary—not because fear demands them, but because resilience depends on them.

What comes next is not inevitable. It's a choice, about discipline, memory and whether we allow violence to dictate the terms of our national response.

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Bondi terror: sometimes we just need to pause and reflect

David Wroe

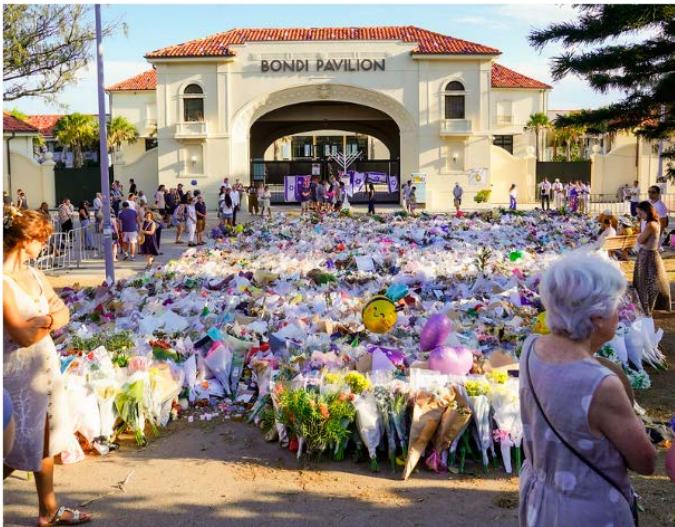


Image: Ashley/Flickr

What do you say at a moment like this? Even to a skilled wielder of words, almost everything is inadequate, which is why well-meaning politicians tend to flail about in great cobwebs of clichés.

How much should we try to capture only the pure humanity? How much should we bring in politics? When do the two meet and overlap, and when should they be kept carefully apart?

Whoever you are, wherever you stand politically and whatever friendships and social circles you belong to, politics will creep into your conversations about the

tragedy of the 14 December Bondi Beach terror attack, in which two men killed at least 15 people. One thing I've come to accept at times like this is that it's okay—indeed often better—to keep certain thoughts to yourself, at least while people's pain is so raw and the atmosphere so combustible.

Here's one possible approach to staying below the point where your utterances reach an escape velocity that gets you into fraught places: 'This was a horrible act of violence, aimed at Jews, that is so far beneath any right-thinking, morally grounded human being that it will remain in our memories as a demonstration that humans are truly capable of monstrosity. The victims were innocent. End of story.'

Sounds pretty reasonable. But even then, does putting a full stop there do justice to the degree of antisemitic hate that seems to have driven this massacre? Leaving the politics out entirely risks levelling this to a random act—people mindlessly hurting other people. There's a difference between mass murder and terrorism.

It's very difficult not to have the politics and geopolitics creep in, but, once they do, we need to know when to apply the brakes so that our chain of thinking doesn't become disordered, jumping ahead in search of the perfect explanation which then reverse engineers our thoughts and speech and distorts their moral clarity.

Of course, many people will instinctively wonder, were these terrorists motivated to kill Jews because they were outraged by the actions of the state of Israel and just lacked the moral and intellectual ability to distinguish between the two concepts? If so, why? Were they influenced by some broader political context, whether that was a network of likeminded extremist friends, or by a background-level of political permissiveness that enabled anger to metastasise into animosity and then to hate-filled violence?

Racism has a political dimension with practical consequences. Healthy politics tries to combat and counter racism, while dangerous politics enables and exploits it. Racism is also everywhere. The extent to which we as individual citizens resist it depends on the skill and sophistication with which we apply our moral clarity to our political views. The extent to which we struggle to resist it depends on all sorts of things. Crucially, these include the influence of our communities and the tendency, ever stronger in the age of social media and fast

opinion-making, to leap to half-baked beliefs that then yield to confirmation bias or other processes that make them stick.

Here are two statements that are both reasonable and yet should not be mixed together so as to cloud our thinking in the aftermath of this atrocity. One, antisemitism has plagued Jews for centuries, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust, and remains a problem. Two, Israel's actions over the past two years, directed by its current elected government, have caused disproportionate and unacceptable suffering to civilians in Gaza while actions such as settlement-building have fuelled hopelessness among Palestinians.

To repeat: the statements should not be mixed. They're independent ideas.

Of course, Israel's self-defence and national security policies are not unrelated to antisemitism—both historic and ongoing—because of the unique circumstances of Israel's creation as a Jewish state after the horrors of the Holocaust.

But here's the problem: the faster we form and articulate views, the more likely we are to foolishly and harmfully conflate the very complex and messy set of issues around geopolitics, history, racism and antisemitism. What needs to be resisted is a fraught, combustible and easily exploited argument that tangles these elements up.

It's disingenuous to claim our minds don't instinctively go to the politics. But the better parts of our nature think immediately about the families, the loved ones, the children, the parents, and the extreme pain that such unbridled violence causes.

First, mourn the loss of innocent life. Second, feel anger and despair that these mass murderers channelled whatever confused political motivations they had into such a monstrous act. Third, pause. Just pause.

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Bondi terror: our response must be unity, not division and distrust

John Coyne

Last night's violence at Bondi was confronting, brutal and deeply unsettling. It shattered the ordinary rhythms of a place that Australians associate with life, leisure and community. In moments like this, grief and fear arrive together. So too does a familiar secondary wave: speculation, outrage and the rapid search for someone or something to blame.

That second wave matters. Because acts of mass violence aren't only about physical harm; they're also about emotional contagion. They're designed, whether ideologically driven or not, to fracture social trust, amplify fear and provoke division. If we allow hatred, suspicion and dehumanisation to dominate the national response, then the violence succeeds in ways that extend far beyond the immediate victims.

Australia must respond differently.

What stood out last night, when two men shot and killed at least 15 at a Jewish festival on Bondi Beach, Sydney, wasn't fear, but courage. Ordinary Australians ran towards danger to help strangers. People applied first aid, shielded others, and stayed when they could have fled. First responders moved swiftly and professionally amid chaotic conditions. Police officers confronted an active threat with decisive bravery, ending further loss of life at immense personal risk.

These actions matter because they reveal a fundamental aspect of social resilience. In the face of violence, Australians didn't retreat into panic or indifference. They acted collectively. They chose care over chaos. This is the story that deserves amplification, not as sentimentality but as evidence of a society that retains moral ballast under pressure.

It's also important to acknowledge that Australia's national and state arrangements to respond to terrorism and mass-casualty violence functioned as intended. Coordination between police, emergency services, and government agencies was rapid and disciplined. Public messaging was measured. There was no rush to speculation, exaggeration, or political theatre.

The press conference delivered by New South Wales Police Commissioner Mal Lanyon was a case in point. It was professional, calm, and deliberately restrained. In moments of national shock, this kind of leadership matters. Clear, factual communication stabilises public sentiment, limits misinformation, and reinforces trust in institutions. This is not a secondary consideration; it's a core element of effective national security.

At a national level, it's also important to be clear-eyed. Australia's National Terrorism Threat Level remains at 'Probable'. That assessment hasn't changed overnight. It reflects an enduring environment in which violent extremism, lone-actor violence, and grievance-fuelled attacks remain possible, but not inevitable. The presence of risk requires not panic but preparedness, vigilance and proportionate response.

For many Australians, however, this kind of violence feels jarring precisely because it disrupts a sense that such threats belong to the past or to somewhere else. That emotional dissonance is particularly acute for children. Where appropriate, we need to speak with them, not to frighten them further, but to help them understand what they're feeling.

Last night, my own 12-year-old experienced fear and anger. Both are entirely fair responses. Children absorb these events not just through headlines but through fragments of conversation, social media, and the emotional temperature of the adults around them. Avoiding the conversation doesn't protect them. It leaves them to process fear alone.

Part of the national response is to help children understand that fear doesn't mean helplessness and that anger doesn't need to turn into hatred. It reinforces the idea that violence is an aberration, not a norm, and that the overwhelming majority of people respond to it with decency and courage. These conversations are quiet but important acts of resilience.

In the hours after tragedies like this, social media becomes a critical battleground. Misinformation spreads faster than facts. Rumours metastasise into narratives of blame. Some voices deliberately exploit uncertainty, pushing racist, misogynistic or conspiratorial explanations long before the facts are known.

Australians shouldn't walk past this behaviour.

For those left wondering what they can do, the answer isn't complicated, but it does require resolve. Shut down those spreading hate online. Call out dehumanising language when you see it. Refuse to share unverified claims or inflammatory speculation. Silence in these moments isn't neutrality; it's permission.

This isn't about suppressing debate or sanitising reality. It's about recognising that words shape environments. The online amplification of hatred doesn't remain online. It spills into workplaces, schools and homes. It normalises division and corrodes trust. Over time, it creates the very social fractures that violent actors seek to exploit.

Australia's strength has always been its social fabric—not because it's perfect, but because it has repeatedly proven resilient under strain. Last night's violence was an attack on people, but it was also an attack on trust, on the idea that public spaces are shared and safe.

We honour the victims not by feeding the forces that thrive on fear but by drowning them out. Violence seeks to divide. Australia's response should do the opposite.

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4

International terrorism

Australia must stop overlooking misogynistic youth extremism

Astrid Young



Image: Markus Spiske/Unsplash

Australia's young people are being radicalised to violence more frequently, more quickly, and for increasingly complicated reasons—including the spread of misogynistic ideology. It's time we better understand the relationship between misogyny and violent extremism, and the threat it presents to national security.

Blended or hybrid radical ideologies—comprising seemingly separate beliefs—are not new in the world of violent extremism, but they are increasingly impacting younger audiences. The director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Mike Burgess, has made clear that youth radicalisation to violence can happen more quickly than previously thought, and identified the need to counter this process as a national priority.

Experts are clear on the role of online spaces in facilitating radicalisation, attributing a wave of youth radicalisation to a network of online communities known as the 'manosphere'. These communities share overlapping anti-feminist ideologies and misogynistic views. Manosphere content is increasingly expanding from the fringes of society into mainstream culture, owing to social media algorithms that amplify the dissemination of such content. This has exposed more young people—particularly young boys—to extremist misogynistic material, opening the door to radicalisation.

The [eSafety Commissioner](#) found that online influencers are instrumental in shaping young males' identities. In 2022, an Australian [survey](#) of over 1,300 young males

found that 25 percent viewed so-called ‘manfluencer’ and self-proclaimed misogynist Andrew Tate as a role model.

That same year, the [Centre for Countering Digital Hate](#) identified 47 YouTube videos in which Tate shared extreme and violent misogynistic views. Prior to being banned, Tate had more than 11 billion views on TikTok, 4 million X followers and 768,000 YouTube subscribers. Children as young as 13 were [found](#) to be engaging with Tate’s content. Tate’s content continues to circulate social media platforms despite his ban.

Misogynistic extremism becomes a national security risk when it radicalises individuals to violence or terrorism.

Prior to a 2023 mass shooting in Allen, Texas, its perpetrator [expressed](#) gender-based grievances as a key motive alongside white supremacist and fascist beliefs. Following the attack, public discussion focused on his fascist beliefs, discounting the influence of misogyny on his ideological development and radicalisation.

Similarly, the perpetrator of the 2020 Hanau terrorist attack in Germany [displayed](#) a ‘very wild mixture of conspiracy theories, racism and incel ideology’. His manifesto [described](#) his sexual frustration and a sense of sexual entitlement to women as his motivation.

Elliot Rodger, perpetrator of the 2014 Isla Vista killings, created videos and wrote a manifesto revealing perceived injustices and sexual deprivation as motivation to ‘punish all females for the crime of depriving [him] of sex’. His attack inspired further acts of misogynistic extremism, including a 2018 shooting in Tallahassee and attacks in Toronto in 2018 and 2020.

Just last month, Owen Lawrence [described](#) plans for ‘terrorism, revenge and misogynistic rage’ in a Facebook manifesto before shooting two women dead in Leeds.

Despite the international precedent, Australian law enforcement remains limited in its capacity to recognise violent misogyny as an ideological driver of political violence.

While Australia does not yet have an officially designated case of misogynistic violent extremism, existing cases fit the description. One such case is Matthew Sean Donaldson’s brutal 2021 attack against a female sex worker in Sydney. Prior to the attack, Donaldson read nine articles online about women being murdered, and had written a list of tasks that included ‘practice kill’ and ‘just do it’. He

also exhibited misogynistic attitudes towards his victim’s occupation, texting her after the attack that she ‘should have picked a different career’.

Seemingly, NSW Police did not consider Donaldson’s violent misogynistic political beliefs to be a motivating factor for his attack, as he was sentenced only for attempted murder. They did not deem the attack to be politically motivated, nor did they label it a hate crime.

As more young people are exposed to violent misogyny, Australia needs a targeted policy response to better mitigate the threat. The government should establish a national framework aimed at deterring young people from extremist ideologies, including misogyny.

Some agencies, such as ASIO and the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, have already acknowledged the link between misogyny and violent extremism. Remaining departments should follow suit. A whole-of-government approach should encourage whole-of-society awareness.

The government has already committed to strengthening its threat communication through its ‘A Safer Australia’ strategy. It can use this strategy to inform the broader population on the potential for misogyny to evolve into violent extremism.

Social media platforms must also be held accountable for popularising manosphere content. A study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue [revealed](#) that YouTube’s algorithms recommended content containing ‘overtly misogynist and manosphere messages’ to young Australian males, even though they had never consumed such content.

Government-supported programs aimed at countering violent extremism should be informed by research on misogyny, radicalisation and its intersection with violent extremism. Practitioners should be trained in managing violent misogynistic behaviour and seek to provide role models for those who need them.

Organisations such as [The Man Cave](#) provide young men with positive male role models and accessible mental health resources. As manosphere content grows in popularity, we should provide further resourcing to these initiatives supporting young men.

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Indonesia has cut funding for counterterrorism programs. Australia should step in

Darul Mahdi

Indonesia's government has slashed its counterterrorism (CT) budgets, despite the persistent and evolving threat of violent extremism. Australia can support regional CT efforts by filling this funding void.

Reducing funding to the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) and associated initiatives aimed at countering violent extremism (CVE) risks undoing years of progress, creating security vulnerabilities that extremist groups and foreign actors could exploit. To support regional stability, Australia should strengthen CT cooperation with Indonesia, ensuring funding for important programs and enhancing adaptability of CT efforts.

On 22 January, President Prabowo Subianto introduced a sweeping budget efficiency policy for 2025. This directive aims to reallocate 306.6 trillion Indonesian rupiah (Rp), equivalent to AU\$30 billion, from the national state budget to support a priority state welfare program focused on food security. About a third of the reallocation will fund the administration's program for free nutritious meals for school children.

Indonesia's CT programs are facing some of the most significant budget cuts. The BNPT has been hit particularly hard, with its 2025 budget slashed by 433 billion rupiah. This cut amounts to 69.1 percent of its original allocation of 626 billion rupiah.

Although Indonesia has remained relatively free from major terrorist attacks in recent years, the significant cut to the BNPT's funding has sparked debate over whether terrorism continues to be a pressing concern for the nation.

The agency was established in 2010 following the suicide bombings targeting the Ritz-Carlton and JW Marriott Hotels in Jakarta in July 2009. It has an expansive scope of responsibilities and significant access to resources and authority. It is mandated to oversee all aspects of Indonesia's CT strategies. Additionally, the BNPT is led by a ministerial-level official who reports directly to the [president](#), facilitating smoother inter-agency coordination.

While the BNPT has made progress since its inception, the recent budget cuts could undermine Indonesian CT efforts.

In addition, the broader implications of the push in the United States to defund [USAID](#) could affect Indonesia, particularly its already underfunded CT and CVE programs. Many such projects run by local NGOs in Indonesia face financial uncertainty. Defunding USAID will only make this worse.

Through its various programs in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia—including Indonesia—USAID has supported programs aimed at countering the root causes of extremism.

For example, the USAID-funded Harmoni program was designed to support initiatives promoting tolerance and resilience against violent extremism in Indonesia. The project worked with various Indonesian government bodies, local civil society organisations and community groups.

Such programs have complemented BNPT activities, particularly in areas where government efforts have fallen short. Civil society organisations play a [vital role](#) in CVE, as they maintain close relationships with practitioners in the field, have strong local networks and offer specialised expertise in the Indonesian context. Collaboration between the BNPT and these organisations is essential for the success of CVE initiatives.

The programs should not be abandoned, even amid major funding reductions. Failure to invest in counter-extremism efforts now could lead to greater security threats in the future, which requires an urgent need for alternative sources of support.

Moreover, analysts warn that a loss of USAID support could provide Beijing with an opportunity to expand its regional soft power. The China International Development Cooperation Agency does seek to expand its government's influence in the region. While it's uncertain whether China would fund CT and CVE initiatives, the void could heighten their interest.

The decline in terrorist attacks by groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State should not be viewed as mission accomplished. [Experts](#) warn that terror threats are constantly evolving, and that complacency

creates vulnerability. Sustained funding for CT and CVE is important for maintaining and strengthening national security.

Australia may be Indonesia's best option for cooperation on CT and CVE. The two countries already have a history of collaboration in this area.

The Australian government has recognised the importance of international engagement strategies on CVE, and of reassessing such strategies. A 2022 [report](#) titled 'Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism 2022-26' acknowledged the need to 're-examine' its CVE objectives through to 2026.

Similarly, in Australia's 2025 CT and CVE strategy, titled '[A Safer Australia](#)', the government outlined its commitment to strengthening international and regional partnerships and continuing cooperation to build capability in Southeast Asia.

Australia can step in to provide support and funding to Indonesia's CT and CVE programs. Continued investment in counterterrorism is essential—waiting until threats materialise will only lead to greater challenges and higher costs in the future.

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India and Pakistan must manage escalation after Pahalgam attack

Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan



Image: Supreme Court

India has launched a retaliatory strike against the Pakistan-based groups responsible for a terrorist attack in Indian Kashmir two weeks ago.

The Indian government released a [press statement](#) announcing that the armed forces had launched Operation Sindoor in the early hours of 7 May. The operation targeted terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. According to the Indian government, nine terrorist sites were hit.

The government also noted that it has engaged in a 'focused, measured and non-escalatory' manner to ensure that the strikes were controlled. The statement also outlined that India exercised 'considerable restraint in selection of targets and method of execution' and didn't target any Pakistani military facilities.

After the strikes, India [briefed](#) the US, British, United Arab Emirates and Russian governments.

The strikes were retaliation for a terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Indian Kashmir, in which 25 Indians and one Nepali civilian were killed. Previous major terrorist attacks in Kashmir in 2016 and 2019 targeted Indian security forces. The Pahalgam attack, however, specifically targeted civilians, resulting in widespread anger in India and leading the government to respond.

According to initial reports, the Pahalgam terror attack was carried out by the relatively unknown Kashmir Resistance Front, which India maintains is a proxy for the better-known Pakistan-backed terrorist group, Lashkar-e-

Taiba. While it is unclear which group was responsible, the fact that it was a Pakistan-based group—with extensive support from Pakistan military—is undisputed.

This is not the first time that India and Pakistan have engaged in such clashes. In the past decade, India has suffered two major terrorist attacks resulting in retaliatory strikes against Pakistan. For a long time, India has struggled to develop an effective response to Pakistan's use of cross-border terrorism as a state policy. Such attacks are clearly designed to keep India off-balance, but India's response has also slowly become harsher.

Traditionally, India hasn't responded with military force. The December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi led to a military mobilisation, but no clashes. In 2008, the Indian government ruled out any military response to the terrorist attack on Mumbai. But the September 2016 Uri terrorist attack, which targeted an Indian army infantry base and killed 18 Indian soldiers, led to a change in India's response. This attack came in the wake of another major terror attack in January 2016 on the Indian air force base in Pathankot. After two major strikes, the Indian leadership was presented with a dilemma, and it responded with what was called a 'surgical strike'—a commando attack—on Pakistani terror hideouts.

In 2019, India suffered another major terrorist attack in Pulwama, killing dozens of Central Reserve Police Force personnel. This showed Pakistan escalating the strikes, not only in scale; it was also an escalation in messaging, considering the bold, open claim by Jaish-e-Mohammed, a Pakistan-based terrorist group, that it carried out the terror strikes. Worried that its 2016 surgical strikes didn't have the necessary deterrence effect, India escalated, launching air strikes on a terrorist base in Balakot, Pakistan. This was the first time that Indian combat planes had attacked Pakistani territory since the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

This radical shift was the result of India's conclusion that non-military measures were having no effect on Pakistan. India had previously responded to terrorist attacks with diplomatic punishment, including curtailing talks or limiting diplomatic interaction with Pakistan. In addition, New Delhi usually sought international diplomatic pressure to constrain Pakistan. Such policy measures failed to change Pakistan's policy on state-sponsored terrorism. India's lack of effective and forceful options led Pakistan to dangerously misread India's possible responses.

Now that India has carried out retaliatory strikes on Pakistan, there is a strong likelihood that Pakistan will respond in some limited fashion to satisfy its domestic constituency. But it is highly unlikely that the two sides will intentionally escalate the current crisis to a prolonged series of clashes.

Though both states are nuclear-armed powers, nuclear weapons are unlikely to play any direct role in these clashes. Nevertheless, given their proximity to one another, one cannot rule out escalation dynamics. Pakistan will likely try to leverage this, invoking such scenarios to put international diplomatic pressure on India. This may have worked in previous conflicts, but as tensions heighten globally, foreign powers are unlikely to be as invested in talking the two sides down.

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Delhi terror attack heightens India-Pakistan tension

Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan

A powerful car bombing near Delhi's Red Fort Metro Station has ratcheted up existing tensions between Delhi and Islamabad. While a motive for the 10 November attack is yet to be specified, the perpetrator and a co-conspirator were from Kashmir, which is the subject of ongoing territorial disputes between India and Pakistan. The Indian government has been reluctant to explicitly link the attacks to Pakistan or Pakistan-based terrorist groups, such as Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), but some commentators have nonetheless drawn such connections.

The terror attack killed at least 13 people and injured around 20. While it remains to be seen how the government will respond to this attack, in May Prime Minister Narendra Modi said 'any future act of terror will be treated as an act of war'. In that same month, India and Pakistan went through a short, intense aerial conflict following an April terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, which killed 25 tourists and was linked to the Resistance Front, a Pakistan-based group.

In a major intelligence victory just hours prior to the blast, the Jammu and Kashmir police [recovered](#) about

3,000 kg of explosives from two rented apartments in Faridabad, [linked](#) to a medical professional working in a local hospital in the city. The confiscated materials included 350 kg of ammonium nitrate, commonly used in explosives for terror attacks. India's national Forensic Science Laboratory has collected more than 40 samples from the blast sites. An official from the organisation said that one of the materials used in the blast was ammonium nitrate, but a second sample [pointed](#) to something more powerful.

Several reports have outlined the sequence of events that evening. However, some confusion persists, including about whether the explosion was accidental or intentional. Based on a number of arrests made since the blast, Indian intelligence sources [believe](#) that a 'Pakistan-backed Jaish-e-Mohammed "white-collar" terror network of medics' were planning six bombings across six cities on 6 December, the anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a disputed site claimed by both Hindus and Muslims that was destroyed by a Hindu nationalist mob in 1992. This led to riots and killings, heightening existing religious tensions.

The intelligence around the planned bombings arose from the interrogations of Shaheen Shahid, Parvez Sayeed Ansari and Muzammil Ahmad Ganaie, who were among those arrested during the investigation. The three, who were reportedly part of a JeM-linked terror module, had been raising funds and coordinating logistics for the attacks.

At a meeting following the attack, Indian Cabinet members [called](#) the bombing 'a heinous terror incident, perpetrated by anti-national forces,' but did not provide any new evidence to support that attribution. At the same meeting, union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw [said](#) the investigation would be 'pursued with utmost urgency and professionalism, so that the perpetrators, their collaborators and their sponsors are identified and brought to justice without delay.' He also affirmed 'India's unwavering commitment to a policy of zero tolerance towards terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.'

Even amid these statements, the Indian government has [been cautious](#) in officially attributing the attack to Pakistan or even JeM, though unnamed investigators have [pointed](#) to the group. This cautious approach appears to be the result of the loud rhetoric following

the Pahalgam attacks and the resultant military clashes. This leads to a type of [commitment trap](#) where decision-makers feel constrained by peacetime promises that cannot always be translated into action in a crisis.

India–Pakistan tensions have been high for several years and were worsened by this year's clashes. Despite India's successes in the short conflicts in April and May, it was let down by a poorly calibrated and lumbering public diplomacy effort that left its people deeply unsatisfied. Since then, geopolitical issues have also put the Indian government on the defensive. Despite early hopes in New Delhi that the Trump administration would view it favourably, India found itself subject to ruinous tariffs for reasons that remain unclear. Some Indian analysts also believe that the United States is treating [Pakistan better](#) than it is treating India, for example by backing Pakistan's claims about Indian fighter jet losses in the clash. Pakistan appears to have taken a lead by unexpectedly strongly endorsing President Donald Trump's bid for a Nobel Peace Prize. Meanwhile, Pakistan also retains strong [Chinese support](#). India's efforts to rebuild ties with China are making some progress, but they are unlikely to ever be as good as Pakistan's.

It remains unclear how India will respond to the Red Fort attacks. The fact that Indian intelligence agencies had discovered the broader plot before the bombing may reduce the pressure on the Indian government to respond with overt force. The Indian government's rhetoric is much less harsh than it was after the April attack, which also suggests that it may not respond with military force. On the other hand, compared with a decade or so ago, India has shown that it is far less constrained by concerns about escalation. Pakistan's continued reliance on terror as a strategy may still result in further clashes.

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Four years later, Afghanistan struggles for its voice

Wahidullah Waissi



Image: Jacqueline Forrester/Department of Defence.

I still remember exactly where I was on 15 August 2021.

It was late afternoon in Canberra. I was sitting at my desk at the Afghan Embassy and my phone wouldn't stop ringing. But after a few short hours, everything changed. Kabul had fallen. The Republic was gone. Friends and colleagues with whom I had worked for years were suddenly silent. Some vanished overnight. Others fled. A few stayed behind, frozen in fear.

It wasn't just a government that collapsed: we witnessed the erasure of a generation's dreams and the undoing of twenty years of hope. How do you explain the feeling of watching your country disappear in real time?

No warplanes marked the takeover. No formal announcements. Just a void.

The city in which I grew up was surrendered without resistance. Ministries emptied. Flags replaced. Girls told to go home. Women told they no longer had a place. Journalists, teachers, civil servants, judges, all suddenly criminalised by their own professions.

People often speak of 'the fall of Kabul' as if it were only a political event. But for millions of Afghans, it was deeply personal. It meant daughters banned from school, degrees and diplomas rendered worthless, history rewritten before our eyes. It was a betrayal, not only by those who seized power, but by those who turned away.

Four years on, the grief hasn't faded, it has simply changed form.

Afghanistan is now the only country in the world where girls are banned from secondary school and university. Women are shut out of nearly every aspect of public life. This is not merely a rights violation; it is the strategic erasure of half a nation's identity.

Meanwhile, aid keeps people alive but cannot restore dignity. The economy has collapsed. Jobs have disappeared. Hope has faded. The young either flee or fall into despair. Every Afghan lives with the weight of a broken promise.

As misery deepens, new dangers grow. Afghanistan is again a safe haven for terrorist groups, threatening far beyond its borders. Refugees, many of whom fled in desperation, are now being forcibly returned by neighbouring countries with no reintegration plan and no protection. They are pushed back into a country that cannot feed or shelter them and in many cases, cannot protect them.

What's unfolding is more than a humanitarian crisis; it is laying the groundwork for instability that will spread well beyond Afghanistan.

In 2020, promises were made. The Doha-branded myth of a reformed 'Taliban 2.0' claimed they would form an inclusive government, protect women's rights and prevent terrorism. World leaders pledged to hold them accountable. None of that happened.

Instead, we have seen a slow normalisation of a regime that rules by fear and exclusion. The Taliban may not be formally recognised, but their de facto acceptance is growing. Countries engage for convenience. Sanctions remain, but so do missed opportunities to support those resisting from the margins.

For two decades, the international community partnered with Afghans to build a new democratic state. But when it mattered most, at the moment of collapse, there was no coordinated plan, no set of transitional safeguards, and no immediate protection for those left behind. The silence that followed was deliberate; it was a collective failure.

In June this year, Russia became the first major power formally to recognise the de facto authorities, despite their systematic violations of human rights and international norms. This shift sends a dangerous message: that power acquired through violence and repression can eventually

earn legitimacy, at least in the eyes of authoritarian actors. It not only undermines international law but emboldens authoritarian actors everywhere.

How Afghanistan fell in just eleven days, without resistance, is for history to judge. Books such as *The Decline and Fall of Republican Afghanistan* by Shuja Jamal and William Maley, *The Ledger* Co-authored by David Kilcullen, and Andrew Quilty's *August in Kabul* offer early accounts. But collapse is not new to Afghanistan. As Amin Saikal says, 'it is a land of struggle and survival'. The challenge now is to turn survival into success, as the old saying goes, success is not final and failure is never fatal; what matters is the courage to continue.

And yet—something unexpected survived.

Across the world, Afghan embassies and consulates, including the one I lead, continue to operate independently. We fly the Republic's flag, not because of nostalgia, but because we believe in the principles it stands for: dignity, sovereignty, inclusion.

Every day, I hear from Afghans, young women who teach in secret, students studying abroad with big dreams, former officials who now work for survival but still working quietly for their country. I see them organise, raise awareness, create art, write, resist. Their courage humbles me.

This is the Afghanistan that didn't fall. It lives in exile, in defiance, in determination. It lives in those who refuse to forget.

It's easy to look away. The headlines are fewer now. The crisis has faded from the front pages.

But 15 August must never be just another anniversary. It should be a moral checkpoint. A reminder that silence has consequences. If we normalise this regime and fall in with their global campaign to silence critical voices, we tell the world that justice and rights are negotiable, that armed takeovers and gender apartheid can be accepted.

We cannot let that happen, not in our names, and not on our watch.

A viable political future for Afghanistan depends on re-centring the approach around people, not power. Afghan democratic voices must be heard again; they are essential to building a counter-narrative to authoritarian rule.

Political space must be reclaimed in exile communities and international forums. This is not about symbolism; it's about building credible, Afghan-led alternatives rooted in legitimacy.

Afghan diplomatic missions that remain true to their constitutional mandate, working together through the Coordination Council of Ambassadors, must be supported and coordinated. They are vital points of contact for the international community should the regime, without even a constitution, face internal crisis. Afghan women and youth must move from visibility to influence.

Above all, we must reject the false choice between recognition and disengagement. Principled engagement, based on rights and legality, with non-Taliban actors, is both possible and necessary.

That late evening in Canberra, after Kabul fell, I sat at my desk and stared at the embassy phone, waiting for a call that never came.

For years, that phone had carried Kabul's voice, a minister's instruction, a greeting from the president, or a mate at the ministry checking in. That night, nothing. Not a word. The line was silent. Completely, hauntingly silent. No orders and no farewells. Just absence.

That silence said everything. We were on our own but still had a duty to carry on for the people, for the flag and for the future.

So this August, reflect on what was lost but don't stop there. Speak up. Stand with those still fighting for a free Afghanistan because silence isn't neutral. It chooses a side.

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