

Terror back on our doorstep

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THIS October, Australians will solemnly commemorate 12 years since the Bali bombings, when a nightclub terror campaign by Islamic fundamentalists killed 202 people, including 88 Australians.

The memories of those slain Australians are still painfully fresh for many, but the passage of time means that, unpleasant as it may be to contemplate, the prison sentences of the Jemaah Islamiah terrorists convicted of the bombings and other atrocities are expiring.

Many convicted members of this terrorist group have been released or are due to walk free in the coming months, raising a confronting new possibility for Indonesia and Australia: some of these extremists will make a journey to jihad in Syria and Iraq, and return as deadlier terrorists.

“This is something the Indonesian government has only recently realised,” an Australian government security analyst, who asked not to be identified, tells The Australian. “The Indonesians are worried that this will open a can of worms for them.”

Particularly because there isn't much the government in Jakarta can do to stop Indonesian jihadists who decide to travel to Syria. In recent months the Indonesian government has become alarmed at the number of its citizens, thought to be more than 100, detected fighting in Syria. Officials caution that such figures are rubbery. But the authorities are concerned that these fighters will return to Indonesia and reactivate Jemaah Islamiah or one of its offshoots.

While the networks conveying Muslim fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia and The Philippines to the Syrian jihad are less organised than those that funnelled fighters to Afghanistan during the 1980s, a pipeline has developed nonetheless. And it is a pipeline that has officials in Australia and Indonesia — who remember that some of the Bali terrorists trained in Afghanistan — worried.

For Australians the new danger on our doorstep is very real. Australians are fighting in Syria and Iraq in greater numbers than those who fought in Iraq during the US-led occupation. And they are getting assistance before they leave, and when they return. “There's a lot of support for the fighters in Australia,” says one Australian intelligence analyst. “There's support indirectly, financially.”

An Australian official familiar with the area says: “This (Syria) has become a very serious issue — the history of Australians is that we tend not to become heavily involved in overseas conflicts; in Iraq and Afghanistan the number of Australians who went was small.

“In the past the number of Australians attracted to extremist-type behaviour has been very small.

What is of concern is the number of Australians crossing the border from Turkey into Syria. What they are doing in Syria is clearly of concern. And what the hell might they do when they come out? How affected will they be by the extremist experience?”

The prospect of a revived jihadist threat means intelligence-sharing co-operation between Jakarta and Canberra is likely to remain tight, despite the recent damage done to the

relationship by the Edward Snowden revelations, which showed that Australia spied on its neighbour.

“Australia as a non-Islamic nation has found itself surprised that jihadists have emerged from our shores to go off and fight in Syria,” former foreign minister Bob Carr tells *The Australian*.

“It shouldn’t surprise us that Indonesia, the world’s largest Islamic nation, is dealing with the same challenge. It highlights the need for constant attention by Australia to this relationship.”

For that reason the Abbott government must concede Australian wrongdoing in the Snowden affair and move briskly on, Carr argues.

“We were in the wrong to allow Defence Signals to snoop on trade negotiations between Indonesia and a third party and to share the details with that third party,” he says. “Give the Indonesians guarantees and return to the important aspects of this relationship, one of which is co-operation on counterterrorism.”

Carr says there are practical things Australia can do to suppress the jihadist threat in Indonesia — funding the Indonesian education system in order to curb the influence of extremist madrassas, for instance. “If we don’t assist them there will be others who will construct the schools, supply the teachers and the textbooks.”

That said, co-operation on counterterrorism has always been good. “It met their needs, it met our needs,” Carr says.

ASIO has long warned a revival of the jihadist threat in Indonesia, because of the large number of imprisoned radicals due to be released, could be just around the corner.

“The impending release of terrorist detainees from Indonesian prisons, a spike of which is expected to occur in 2014, is likely to increase this threat,” the agency says. “Many of the individuals scheduled to be released in this period have undertaken terrorist training or have been linked to, or involved in, bombings against either Western or local targets.” ASIO warns the release of these men could inject “significant capability” into extremist networks.

Then there are the Indonesian extremists who may one day return battle-hardened and well trained from the Syrian front. Indonesian police have the names of 56 Indonesians either in Syria or on their way, according to Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict director Sidney Jones.

“But that’s almost certainly only part of the picture,” Jones tells *The Australian*. “We think as well that it’s over 100 but we don’t know more than that.”

Like Australian jihadists, Indonesians in Syria seemed to be more or less evenly aligned with rival Islamic State (formerly known as ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) and Jabhat al-Nusra.

“In general, the groups that have aligned with al-Nusra are ones that are opposed to violence on Indonesian soil — and that includes JI in its renewed form,” Jones says.

“And the more militant groups, which are opposed to JI and have supported violence on Indonesian soil, are aligned with ISIS.”

Those who have travelled to Syria are a mix of known extremists, students and ex-prisoners, Jones says.

But unlike the Australian government, which can stop would-be fighters in their tracks by cancelling their passports, Indonesian authorities have no way of grounding citizens who plan to venture to the Syrian battlefields.

“It’s not against the law to go overseas to train and fight, so there’s no way to prevent people from going if they’re prepared to do so,” Jones says.

But any suggestion the Syrian jihad could unite the disparate, warring factions that make up Indonesia’s radical Islamist community is wrong, as they are as bitterly divided as the Syrian rebel movement, she says.

However, the Syrian conflict could professionalise Indonesian jihadists, giving them the skills, expertise and leadership they have for many years lacked and which has prevented them from launching major attacks.

“One of the things that’s been missing from the post-Afghan generation is really anybody with the weapons training or operational experience that can actually plan big jihadi strikes,” Jones says. “We really haven’t had that since 2009 and even that wasn’t as well-planned as some of the early ones.”

There is a chance that much of this problem could prove academic. As the Syrian civil war drags on, the odds of returning grow fainter and fainter. Like Australian fighters, many Indonesian jihadists have no plans to return.

“The Syrian jihad is called the one-way jihad here,” Jones says. “Partly because people believe it constitutes the great battle of the Islamic apocalypse. Many of the people going don’t have any expectation of returning.”