

Address to the Institute for Regional Security – National Gallery of Australia

March 17, 2015

Countering the Ideology of Violent Extremism

I congratulate the Institute of Regional Security on its work, its focus, its change of name and its contribution to the public discourse on promoting regional security and prosperity.

Tonight I will discuss an issue that goes to the heart of regional stability and poses a challenge to global security – an issue that has clear implications for Australia, our region and beyond, an issue that keeps me awake at night – this is a form of terrorism dangerous, more complex, and more global than we have ever witnessed.

By way of introduction, let me go back in time – after the Second World War in 1949, George Orwell warned the world about the rise of totalitarianism in his dystopian classic *1984*, in which the population laboured under constant surveillance while deprived of many of the basic necessities of life.

The populace were held in a constant state of nationalist fervour by the government, which used the threat of external enemies to manipulate them into accepting their austere existence.

The nation most closely to have fulfilled Orwell's vision is North Korea.

The people of North Korea have no choice in whether or not to be part of the national cult of its ruthless Kim family.

That is not the case for those who have chosen to be part of the self-titled Islamic State, also known as ISIL or Daesh.

Daesh, along with other terrorist organisations, are new non-state actors that we must confront in terms of global security.

It is a cause of great consternation to our government, to communities and to families as to what attracts Australians, mostly young people, to become fighters for such a brutal and bloodthirsty organisation.

It is easier to rationalise why some individuals travel to the battlefield – those with long criminal histories, those who have struggled with mental illness and drug abuse.

However, it is much more difficult to comprehend, let alone explain, why young men from middle income families, with a comfortable lifestyle on the Gold Coast for example, would be motivated to travel across the world to Syria and Iraq to join an organisation that seeks to drag the world back to the Dark Ages in its preferred form of brutality and violence – crucifixions, beheadings, mass executions.

It is even harder to explain why young women from similar backgrounds would be motivated to join an organisation notoriously vicious in its degrading treatment of women and girls.

Young women who have joined Daesh are being exploited in the most appalling way – forced into abusive marriages, used as sexual slaves, and manipulated for propaganda and recruitment purposes.

Daesh has published instructions for its followers on the treatment of sexual slaves, these instructions encourage the raping and beating women.

Even children are not immune, with Daesh supporting the sexual abuse of girls who have not yet reached puberty.

In some cases, young women who join Daesh have ended their lives as suicide bombers. Some join an all-female militia known as the Al-Khansaa brigade which detains and punishes civilian women who do not follow Daesh's medieval interpretation of Sharia law.

In an unspeakable act of treachery to woman, this all-female brigade reportedly operates brothels where non-Muslim Iraqi women and girls are held as sex slaves for Daesh terrorist fighters.

The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters is not isolated to Australia.

Thousands of people of different nationalities have travelled to the conflict zone from all over the world – from the Middle East, Africa, Central and South Asia, to Europe, Russia, United States and many other countries – more than 80 nations – and their citizens are supporting Daesh.

We know of at least 90 Australians who have joined Daesh and are fighting in Syria and Iraq. A similar number supporting them over here in Australia.

At least 20 have been killed in Syria and Iraq, around 30 have returned to Australia.

It is profoundly sad that individuals have fallen under the sway of this murderous bunch of thugs, who reject the peaceful global order, and a positive contribution to life, in favour of creating suffering and misery in an awful conflict. They have been lured into this life of misery or indeed – to their deaths.

I feel profoundly sad for the families of those who have gone, often without their knowledge – the parents of those who have been sucked into this mire.

It is important that we try to understand what attracts people to such extreme ideologies.

In attempting to shed some light on that question I went back to a book written more than 60 years ago.

The American of German origin, Eric Hoffer, published a work in 1951. It was widely acclaimed.

In fact in 1983 Hoffer was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Reagan.

His seminal work *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, explored the psychological underpinnings of mass movements.

Like Orwell, Hoffer was mostly concerned about the destructive potential of fascism and communism, although he believed the same forces underpinned the psychology of all mass movements, including religions and institutionalised racism, for example.

Hoffer argued that people who are frustrated with their lives and who can see no hope in the face of what they perceive as inevitable failure, are prime candidates for recruitment as fanatical followers.

These people are attracted by the “total surrender” of oneself to a greater cause, where others take responsibility for the decisions that determine whether or not their lives are successful.

This can be cultivated into an extreme form of devotion where people are willing to sacrifice their lives in support of this ideology.

Hoffer’s work offers some grim insights in the context of understanding the lure that terrorist movements like Daesh seem to have.

He opined that “Dying and killing seem easy when they are part of a ritual, ceremonial, dramatic performance or game.”

The highly ritualised beheadings staged by Daesh, of aid workers, of journalists and others – the immolation of a captured Jordanian pilot, scenes which horrify and repulse the majority of people, are clearly designed to appeal to the subconscious of individuals vulnerable to their message.

Hoffer also observed that “It is obvious that a proselytizing mass movement must break down all existing group ties if it is to win a considerable following. The ideal potential convert is the individual who stands alone ...”

Daesh targets individuals as it reaches out, and seeks to convince the vulnerable and misguided that the apocalyptic battle it offers is more important than family and community, and that it trumps any existing ethical or religious beliefs.

These barbarians seek to divide our families and communities – training their targets to not talk to their parents and not reveal their radicalisation before they leave the country to join Daesh in the Middle East.

They seek to obscure truth and use the techniques of propaganda to great effect, through the global reach of social media and other online channels.

Daesh deliberately seeks to seek to destroy any culture or belief system that competes with its violent narrative, even to the extent of ransacking and destruction of ancient sculptures and artefacts in Iraq’s Mosul Museum.

The terrorists have burned priceless, precious manuscripts that tie the people of the Middle East to their real, extraordinary histories – because, just like Nazism or Communism, they want to draw people into their false movement.

And again, from Hoffer: “Hitler’s fanatical conviction that he was building a new order that would last a thousand years communicated itself both to followers and antagonists. To the former, it gave the feeling that in fighting for the Third Reich they were in league with eternity, while the latter felt that to struggle against Hitler’s new order was to deny inexorable fate”.

Daesh is attempting to emulate this approach with its declaration of a Caliphate, claiming to establish a “pure” form of government that will attract the fanatical supporters willing to die for the cause.

It is seeming ‘invincibility’ – was – until the US-led airstrikes, all part of its attraction.

Hoffer believed the process of recruitment of followers, which we today describe as radicalisation, had remarkable similarities, regardless of the ideology.

This was the targeting of individuals from across the socio-economic spectrum that had lost faith in the lives they were living – people who saw the modern world as being irredeemably corrupt or unfair.

In effect, the content of their ideology was less important than their status as alienated, frustrated individuals who had lost hope in the ability of their society to support change.

Respected academic Sidney Jones from the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict – an expert on terrorism, particularly in the Indonesian context – identifies five main motivations behind foreign terrorist fighters joining Daesh:

First, a desire to take part in the final battle of the Islamic apocalypse (the final battle between infidels and Muslims preceding the Day of Judgement);

A desire to help Muslims under attack (grounded in deep dissatisfactions felt by Sunni Muslims in Syria and Iraq);

A desire to wage war per se, take part in any jihad – Syria being the easiest to access;

A desire to benefit from what she calls the “5 star jihad” – that is, Daesh is providing fighters and their families with a stipend, accommodation, food, medical care, education; and

Fifthly, a desire to be part of the Caliphate and the great Islamic experiment (that is: to participate in the new state, provide skills, and live by Islamic Sharia law).

These points are consistent with the broad aspects of Hoffer’s observations.

As I observed in my address to the Brookings Institute in Washington earlier this year, the pernicious force of global terrorism has come to the fore and wields greater power than ever before and in fact threatens to undermine the nation state.

It respects no nation, no government, no laws, nor humanity, nor any civilised behaviour or norms.

The “caliphate” that Daesh has declared puts whole villages, towns, cities and vital infrastructure in both Iraq and in Syria under its ruthless governance. This territorial gain, and of others such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, challenge the sovereignty and very existence of established states – and thus the world order that underpins our existence.

Today we must also be aware of the disruptive potential of technology. It was much lauded during the so-called Arab Spring that began in late 2010 – social media was used by groups pursuing the overthrow of long-term authoritarian regimes.

It is clear that the Daesh leadership was watching and learning about the power of social media which it has harnessed very effectively in terms of finding new recruits and spreading its propaganda.

The Internet has been used to bring the conflict into our homes and into our societies.

It is a tool that the violent extremists are using in their recruitment drives – whether to entice young Australians to risk their lives in Iraq and Syria, as we’ve seen with the tragic story of Melbourne teenager Jake Bilardi – or to strike here.

No nation is quarantined from this threat, in our globalised interconnected world.

We have no choice but to be part of this struggle against extremism in all its forms, both home and abroad, this will take years, decades, potentially a generation – to resolve.

It is essential that we work on multiple fronts in combatting violent extremism in our time.

We must confront the physical threat posed by the poisonous ideology.

Australia has a key national interest in fighting the spread of violent extremism – which is why we have deployed defence personnel to Iraq to assist the Government of Iraq in its fight against Daesh at its base – to reclaim Iraqi territory and to protect Iraqi people.

Internationally, we’ve taken a lead role by co-sponsoring the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 on Foreign Terrorist Fighters, that requires all nations to prevent the financing, travel and activities of terrorists.

We’ve strengthened cooperation with our counterterrorism partners, including during the recent Australia-UK Ministerial consultations, and we’ve worked particularly closely with our regional partners in Southeast Asia to counter terrorism.

Attorney General George Brandis represented the Government in Washington at the US Summit on Countering Violent Extremism and now Australia will host a regional summit in June this year with nations in our region to exchange ideas, experiences, and intelligence on how we can best combat the terrorist narrative and address the threat of on-line radicalisation.

It is crucial that this is not portrayed as a struggle that can be defeated militarily in far flung battlefields. This is a struggle against a malignant idea, a concept, an ideology.

We have to do everything we can to strengthen social cohesion within our society and provide a counter-narrative to the messages of hate and division being spread by these violent extremists.

Australia itself – as an idea – actually represents such a counter narrative.

We are a free, open, liberal, democracy that supports the right of everybody to live and participate in our society.

It is an egalitarian society founded on principles including the rule of law, human rights, and within which there is great social mobility.

We are not perfect.

Our society is a work in progress to be improved, to be worked upon – and we want all of our citizens to participate in that improvement.

Through a range of community programs, backed by \$545 million in public funds, the Government is taking firm steps to combat the radicalisation of young Australians, including women and girls, and to keep our people safe from terrorism.

We have increased community outreach to highlight our humanitarian contribution to those suffering in Syria and Iraq.

We are challenging the lies that Daesh spreads to demonise those who oppose its demented ideology.

Through our Living Safe Together program we are helping communities work with individuals at risk of radicalisation through mentoring and coaching, education and employment.

The concept of community is vital.

Family and friends are likely to be the first to see changes in a person who is radicalising.

Our National Security Hotline (1800 123 400) has now taken well over 200,000 calls from the public.

Our Muslim communities, its leaders, its mosques, play an important role in combatting extremism.

I thank Muslim community leaders for their vital support.

The Government has a \$21 million initiative that will reduce access to extremist material online by identifying and shutting down extremist sites, and removing extremist content that is considered to be a security threat.

We have made advocating terrorism an offence under the Criminal Code and of course – we're taking direct action to stop radicalised Australians travelling to the conflict zone. We want to prevent them from gaining actual experience in the ways of terrorists so they don't return battle-hardened in the terrorist trade.

I have prescribed areas in Iraq and Syria (Al Raqqa province in Syria and Mosul district in Iraq) – areas where Daesh is effectively in control, and it is now an offence under Australian law for any Australian to enter, or remain in, Al Raqqa or Mosul without a legitimate purpose. Anyone who does so faces a penalty of up to 10 years imprisonment on their return.

We have also cancelled over 100 passports of those seeking to travel to the conflict. Using powers under our new Foreign Fighters legislation, I have suspended another 13.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a major challenge of our times. It is our greatest national security threat at present.

To keep our community safe, we must find ways to protect the vulnerable among us, and by that I mean those who are susceptible to the siren song of the extremists luring our people to stage attacks on our soil or encouraging them to a senseless death.

Often, these are people wanting to be part of something that gives greater meaning to their lives – people asking themselves where it is, in our society that they can fit in.

A sense of alienation, of loneliness – these are the personal feelings of vulnerability – and they may be only momentary, in a person's life – but these are what the extremists seek to exploit.

This Institute has a role to play in the public discussion on the challenges and I know that this Institute will live up to its ideals and insights, ideas, impact as we grapple with these and other regional security and global security issues.

I look forward to working with the community, with the Islamic community and the broader Australian public – to provide people across this nation with the tools, the techniques, or indeed the answers on how they can contribute to the betterment of society and make this a richer, brighter world.