

War on terror: fighting the lure of jihad among our youth

RICK MORTON, [The Australian](#), July 29, 2015



Epping Boys High in Sydney, where a 17-year-old student has been investigated by counter-terrorism police. Picture: Rohan Kelly Source: News Corp Australia



Alleged Sydney jihadist Milad bin Ahmad-Shah al-Ahmadzai Source: Supplied



Former Sydney teen Abdullah Elmir, left, and former Melbourne man Yusuf Yusuf, right. Source: Supplied

The initial thought was the most pure: “We’ve absolutely f..ked this, we have f..ked this.” That was the view of a senior Liberal minister just days after the federal government announced its Balkanised, \$12 million counter-radicalisation program and months after the Coalition put the heat on the Australian community — translated: the Muslim community — to confront the threat of terrorism.

The Living Safe Together program was bureaucratic colour-by-numbers, doling out small grants to a hodgepodge of community groups, a public awareness campaign masquerading as evidence-based, pointy counter-extremism efforts.

Worse, was the view in some places, it infuriated Muslims.

About the same time, the NSW government was preparing its own suite of programs and Multiculturalism Minister John Ajaka was watching the fallout, taking notes on the art of avoiding unnecessary friction.

“Most people will tell me about all of the great work being undertaken within various communities and great examples of youth getting together, making great contributions,” he says. “The question that I am asking the stakeholders to consider is what about the one you are not engaging with? What about that young man or woman sitting in their bedroom on a computer, being brainwashed by some evil individuals, and you are not aware of this happening? “These are the ones we need to reach, identify and bring them back into the fold and unravel any evil.”

In Britain, typically held up as a society that experiences social phenomena years ahead of Australia, Prime Minister David Cameron has had enough of the nuance. “In the past, governments have been too quick to dismiss the religious aspect of Islamist extremism,” he said in a landmark speech last week. “That is totally understandable. It cannot be said clearly enough: this extremist ideology is not

true Islam. I have said it myself many, many times, and it's absolutely right to do so. And I'll say it again today.

"But simply denying any connection between the religion of Islam and the extremists doesn't work because these extremists are self-identifying as Muslims.

The fact is, from Woolwich to Tunisia, from Ottawa to Bali, these murderers all spout the same twisted narrative, one that claims to be based on a particular faith."

Cameron stopped short of calling extremism an existential threat but said it was "the struggle of our generation". In sweeping, bold new measures the British government will give parents the power to cancel the passports of their own children if they suspect they may attempt to join the Islamic State. Cameron targeted foreign news media that "broadcast hate preachers and extremist content" and mocked internet companies that "are happy to engineer technologies to track our likes and dislikes" but claim tackling extremism online is "all too difficult".

Early this week London's The Times reported more than 30 children had been the subject of judicial orders in the past year and risked being taken into care because they could be radicalised or already had been. That's a child every fortnight. Interim care orders have been issued to cancel passports of children or to remove them from the threat of indoctrination within their own families.

In the wake of the July 7 London Underground bombings Britain established its own counter-radicalisation program called Channel, a bespoke outfit that assembles, depending on the individual case, social workers, police, probation officers, housing staff, health services and schools to turn around poisonous, radical thoughts. In 2007-08 there were 75 referrals to the service. That rose to 1281 in 2013-14 and, in the two years to June last year, 2300 people were referred to the program, 40 per cent of them under the age of 18.

But a referral is not necessarily the end of the story.

Britain's youngest terrorist, the 14-year-old who pleaded guilty to inciting an Anzac Day terror plot in Australia, was 13 when he was shepherded into Channel. Last week this newspaper revealed police were investigating allegations a 17-year-old student at Sydney's Epping Boys High School was preaching Islamic State ideology in the playground.

The alleged proselytising took place under a school-sanctioned prayer group and the boy, an acolyte of Islamic extremist Milad bin Ahmad-Shah al-Ahmadzai, no longer attends the school.

Ahmadzai is in jail awaiting trial for the near-fatal shooting of a man outside a gay club in Rydalmere, in Sydney's northwest, and an alleged ram raid at the Macquarie Centre shopping mall.

NSW Premier Mike Baird yesterday announced an audit of all prayer groups in state schools which he insisted was not targeted at Muslim students. "We're doing this together ... I have been nothing but absolutely in awe of the Muslim leadership," he said. "They have been determined to stamp out extremism."

In a memo sent yesterday to 2230 NSW public school principals, Department of Education deputy secretary Gregory Prior and NSW Police deputy commissioner Cath Burn provided a dedicated terror hotline for reporting suspicious behaviour. "The Department of Education and NSW Police Force have recently agreed to reinforce and strengthen their joint protocols around anti-social behaviour, particularly as they relate to the area of extremist behaviours," the memo says.

NSW Police Assistant Commissioner Mark Murdoch was sure to make clear that the case at Epping would not be the last.

"This school that is the current focus of our attention is not unique. And I believe that," he said at the weekend.

About 120 Australians have left the country as foreign fighters for Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, some of them teenagers such as "Ginger Jihadi" Abdullah Elmir.

In November last year four brothers from the Elbaf family, the youngest 17, pretended they won a holiday to Thailand before surprising their sister with an online message posted from Syria saying: "See you in paradise".

Others have tried and failed.

When two Sydney Boys High students were stopped from leaving the country and their school laptops were seized by Australian Federal Police the school told no one else, not even its own governing department.

Atheist Melbourne school student Jake Bilardi converted to Islam and blew himself up in a suicide bombing in Iraq in March. The 18-year-old initially dismissed Islamic State as "mischief-makers" but its recruiters had persuasive, long reaches through social media.

The Brookings Institution estimates Islamic State, also known as Daesh, has 46,000 active accounts on Twitter with an average of 1000 followers each. In the US radicals have used methods similar to the ones paedophiles employ when grooming children to softly win over their targets, sending chocolates and items of clothing to impressionable young men and women.

They use one tactic so rare in today's world: they pay attention. To you, to your troubles. Incrementally, they apply the solution and that solution is their twisted version of Islam.

Curtin University counter-radicalisation expert Anne Aly has been watching the positioning of Britain and other regions, such as Africa, attempting to stamp out extremism and she is alarmed. "One of the things we need to not forget about is the violence in violent extremism, not just extremism per se, because that in itself is not against the law," Aly says. "It's the violence. Often not the way we think it (radicalisation) goes is that somebody adopts the ideology, becomes a Salafi or Wahhabi and then they accept violence as part of the ideology. I am finding with my research, where we look at a database and personal case histories of more recent self-activated people like foreign fighters, it is actually the violence that is the first thing that attracts them and then the ideology comes as a way to justify the violence. "But there is no one hard and fast rule ... A lot of people have fairly radical or extreme views but never commit an act of violence."

Terror has rusted the social apparatuses in Australia; fear has paralysed schools, social workers, community groups and others.

On the one hand, people are seized by the lingering threat of violence and, on the other, by concerns about oppressive national security intrusions into their lives.

Last week the minister assisting the Prime Minister on counter-terrorism, Michael Keenan, conceded there were compromises made on the balance between liberty and security. "I didn't get into parliament to increase the power of the state. I think we have taken small steps which could be characterised as eroding liberties in some small sense, but ultimately I believe that the Australian people are prepared to accept that," he said.

He cited metadata retention laws as one such measure. “Instinctively that was not a policy that I was attracted to, but you cannot possibly be in this role and see the value of metadata not just in national security but every criminal investigation, and maintaining that is vital,” he said.

He said he wanted returning fighters such as Melbourne’s Adam Brookman to tell their stories, to forcefully disavow people of the “romantic” notion that joining Islamic State is somehow an “adventure”.

This week the Lebanese Muslim Association, one of the largest and longest standing associations in the country, launched an excoriating attack on the government’s blundering approach to radicalisation. “A ‘discussion paper’ they compiled to drive a recent community consultation was made up of a series of generalisations and basic facts about violent extremism,” president Samier Dandan wrote on the LMA’s website. “It still referred to radicalisation as though it was a result of Islamic ideology, still refused to acknowledge the impact of social issues on the process, still focused upon the endgame of a very broad process and refusing to deal with the root causes. “It exacerbates an environment of disaffection and disempowerment and does nothing but isolate the very community that best understands these challenges.”

This may be true but the LMA refused to engage with the government on these measures.

In February Tony Abbott was reprimanded for remarks he made in which he said he wished Muslim leaders would say Islam was a religion of peace “more often and mean it”. The dialogue, if there ever was one, has broken down.

One of the groups funded federally in the grants round is the Australian Multicultural Foundation, which runs a prevention and awareness program. Executive director Hass Dellal is quick to point out there is no actual deradicalisation program run in the country.

“ISIS is now looking for anyone who is disaffected, Muslims and non-Muslims,” he says. “There are a number of variables in all of this but ultimately this is an individual phenomenon. “Those closest to individuals — families, friends and peers — are best placed to protect them. So we need to provide them with the early warning signs.”

Aly doesn’t think there is cause to follow Britain or other Western countries down an even harder line path to combating terror — “they have a very different demographic to us, we don’t have the sorts of problems they have” — but that doesn’t change the fact eyes are fixed elsewhere waiting for their strategies to fail spectacularly or succeed with a whimper. “We are in a good position, we are able to take the lessons from around the world,” she says.

“So now we wait and see what happens.”