

ASIO goes undercover to find Islamic State cells



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Paul Maley, The Australian, 12:00AM December 19, 2016

Australia's domestic spy agency is running secret operations against Islamic State, inserting covert operatives into terrorist cells in a bid to thwart domestic attacks.

The Australian understands ASIO has begun running a small number of so-called "special - intelligence operations" as part of a broader push by police and security agencies to make full use of new far-reaching powers that have been codified in successive waves of national security legislation reform.

Before the passage of the new laws, ASIO operatives could be vulnerable to prosecution for engaging in such operations.

Since September 2014, the government has passed eight separate tranches of national - security legislation that have either amended existing offences, created new ones or extended far-reaching surveillance, arrest and control powers to security agencies. Beyond secret intelligence operations, figures from the Australian Federal Police show police have arrested more than 40 suspected terrorists under changes to the law that lower the threshold for arrest in terrorism cases.

Police have also begun prosecuting people for the newly created offence of advocating terrorism.

Australian Federal Police and South Australian Police detectives on Thursday charged an Adelaide man for advocating terrorism after the 50-year-old allegedly uploaded extremist videos to social media. It was the first such case of its kind and AFP Commissioner Andrew Colvin said the creation of the offence had had a demonstrable effect on the level of - extremist rhetoric in the community. "From what we have observed, the introduction of the advocating terrorism legislation has served as a strong deterrent," Mr Colvin said. "A number of people who had previously been quite active and vocal in this space ceased their activities once the legislation was enacted. New legislation raises the potential of further charges, but in this instance, it has had a greater value in disrupting and dissuading criminal behaviour."

Mr Colvin did not mention names, but previously high-profile extremists such as Sydney preacher Junaid Thorne and Italian Muslim convert Musa Cerantonio, who is in jail on terrorism charges, have been noticeably quieter since the offences were created.

Among the most secretive powers available to the agencies are those allowing ASIO to run so-called special intelligence operations. The power to run these stings, which were modelled on the controlled operations police use against organised crime targets such as drug importers, was contained in recent amendments to the ASIO Act. Previously ASIO officers, or their informants, were potentially liable for prosecution if they broke the law while infiltrating the cell, something they would almost certainly be required to do.

The federal Attorney-General, George Brandis, confirmed ASIO was running secret operations, but would not give any details on how often, or against what targets. The Australian understands that in all cases ASIO has used the power to work counter-terrorism targets.

Speaking two years after ASIO raised the threat of terrorist attack in Australia from "possible" to "probable", Senator Brandis said Australians were relaxed about the threat of terror, despite suffering four Islamic State-inspired terror attacks in two years: "That's not because people are insouciant or complacent; they're not complacent when there's been a major terrorism incident in the heart of Sydney. "I think the public seemed to be satisfied that the police and national security agencies are managing the problem well."