

## The risk of mass casualty attack

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An attempt at a mass casualty attack in Australia is likely, according to Nick Kaldas, one of Australia's most experienced terrorism experts. It's no more or less likely after the atrocity in Manchester but it's timely to reflect on how Australia may prevent or respond to such an attack. The first step of any strategy is to be clear about the nature and scale of the threat.

It is Islamist extremism that ties together attacks as far-flung as the 2001 New York aircraft attacks, the 2002 Bali bombing, the 2013 mass murder in Nairobi's Westgate shopping centre, the 2014 knife killings at Kunming railway station in China, and the 2015 slaughter in Paris. There have been many other such attacks around the world, leaving many thousands dead. In Sydney's 2014 Lindt cafe siege two innocents, Tori Johnson and Katrina Dawson, were killed, and a year later a lone police employee, Curtis Cheng, was murdered in Parramatta.

The ideology at work is the same and it would be foolish to think Australia will remain immune to mass casualty attack.

Most Australians grasp this reality. Most understand that Islamist terror cannot be bought off; it wants nothing less than a totalitarian caliphate for the planet. Jihad denialism, which wilfully obscures the wellsprings of Islamist violence, has limited appeal in Australia although its supporters include progressive elites with their media megaphones.

In Manchester native-born singer Morrissey took to task politicians who condemned the latest "extremists" while remaining silent on their unchanging Islamist identity. "An extreme what?" asked Morrissey. "An extreme rabbit? In modern Britain, everyone seems terrified to officially say what we say in private."

The Lindt cafe siege showed official hesitation, on the part of the police, about what they were up against (a hostage-taker, Man Haron Monis, who demanded an Islamic State flag) and what they could do to stop him (snipers were unsure whether the law would cover them if they took a shot). Police tactics, the psychiatrist's advice and the approach of negotiators gave the impression of a mindset from pre-Islamist days struggling to get up to date. The psychiatrist advised that Monis was "grandstanding" and not a genuine terrorist; he was not aware that in 2014 Islamic State had urged jihadis around the world to improvise their own attacks in the name of the group.

If jihadist ideology is a constant, tactics and strategies change. So-called "hostile vehicle attacks" — encouraged by Islamic State last November — represent an obvious vulnerability in our large cities. While there are complaints about inconvenient road blocks at country fairs, tracts of our major cities remain open and unprotected while officials argue about where bollards should be placed and who should pay.

Certainly we should expect to see heavily armed police guarding public buildings, spaces and events. Mr Kaldas, a former NSW police deputy commissioner, suggests a local version of New York's Hercules tactical response teams, which carry machineguns and make their

presence known at major events. Not long ago, Australians would have recoiled at this, but Mr Kaldas is correct that the public mood has changed. NSW police, our largest force, are considering whether “long arms” weapons should be made more widely available to officers.

Reassurance is important — jihadis want to disrupt everyday life — and dogged, clever policing behind the scenes may prevent attacks or reduce their scale. Intelligence from local Islamic communities also will be vital; moderate Muslims are fighting for the soul of Islam. But the challenge facing police is formidable.

The Manchester bomber, Salman Abedi, was known to British intelligence agencies “up to a point”, according to Home Secretary Amber Rudd. In Australia as elsewhere, there are far too many could-be jihadis on the radar for police to watch or pursue any but a selection of them. ASIO has more than 400 “priority” counter-terror investigations. It is difficult to prosecute suspected foreign fighters returning from Syria and Iraq (there may be more than 100), and difficult to know which of them will present the most serious threat.

We will need realism, vigilance, well-resourced policing — and some luck.