

Ramping up the Alert: The Terror Threat in Australia

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How Freudian of the smaller, vassalised country to attempt outshining the larger, fraternal (and maternal) counterpart. Even as the IS threat is being expanded as the curse of the Middle East, distant legislatures are getting busy finding hypothetical standards in examining terror threats. Even worse, they remain hypotheses, untested and hostile to evidence.

The Australian Immigration Minister, Scott Morrison, has never been troubled by the incursions of the empirical world into his scantily governed portfolio. On Wednesday, he decided to tell Australia that there had been “specific” threats to Australia which he was “not at liberty to go beyond”. With broad strokes of presumption, he suggested that those “radicalised” by their period as combatants overseas, some “two-thirds of them [had] got up to things when they come back.”

Some at the country’s National Press Club at Canberra should have been falling off their seats at the remarks. “We know there is a very real threat by the death cult that is operating over in Iraq and Syria and we know that that threat is not just over the Middle East.”

The dangers of the half-educated remark should be obvious. The specific is absorbed into the general. Hypotheses become factual assertions. There is no need to actually explain what the mischief might have entailed, or give figures about the dimension of this threat. Truth be told, Morrison’s bag of tricks on that score is light.

The occasion for getting the Australian electorate into such a state was the arrests of two Muslim men in the suburb of Logan in Brisbane. The iQraa Islamic Centre in Underwood saw an operation mounted by 180 personnel of the Australian Federal Police and Queensland Police, netting 21-year-old Agim Kruezi and 31-year-old Omar Succarieh. Succarieh’s brother, Ahmed, has been investigated in connection with a suicide bomber incident which took place in Syria in September last year.

Succarieh has been charged with providing funds to Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the designated nasties who so happens to be fighting the West’s own war against Bashar al-Assad in Syria. He was also charged with plans for an incursion into Syria “to engage in hostile activity”, while Kruezi was similarly charged under the *Crimes (Foreign Incursions and Recruitment) Act 1978*.

A perverse outcome of the act’s application might well be that fighting for the pro-government forces in Syria might not fall within the realms of illegality. Some Australian academics have even gone so far as to suggest that the market for civil war should be open

slather, at least when it comes to ideological commitment – don't restrain fighters going to a foreign conflict, especially for a cause against a brutal regime.

As Ben Saul, professor of international law at the University of Sydney has argued, “while our government opposes Assad's terror, Australian law paradoxically criminalises anyone who fights for the rebels – yet allows Australians to fight for President Bashar al-Assad.”[1] (Saul may be wrong on this – Australians fighting for Assad are bound to be netted in any case, though a conviction is quite another story.)

Caution too rapidly transforms into indiscretion – individuals like Morrison, should have little role in dabbling in matters of state security, but immigration and security are the nasty twins of his tenure. His ministerial stewardship is public policy's latrine. “The fact that there are Australians involved... and there is ambitions that go well beyond just the establishment of the [Islamic] State and, as I said, there are many other terrorist organisations that fit under this umbrella of what is occurring in the Middle East.”

Call back radio has been flooded by an otherwise vegetative public, worried that the society was awash with “sleepers” waiting to strike. “How did they get there?” lamented one caller to the Brisbane radio station 4BC.

Morrison's statement is not decoupled from various assumptions. The first is the establishment of IS, which presupposes global caliphate ambitions that will see an enthusiastic radical blow himself up at a sporting event in Australia. Why people go and fight in such conflicts varies, but they are never simplistic codes of general definition. One Muslim's disagreement with another need not imply carting constitution and common law to the slaughter house. Complexity and nuance are enemies of the Morrison case.

The second is the reading of IS in the manner of the “Red Menace” in the late 1940s, a pathological-biological spread of irresistible woe that would infect its hosts and poison its subjects. Monolithic communism was the mentally weak statement for boosting security budgets and keeping intelligence services in saucepans and scourers. Nationalism, indigenous liberation movements, and particularity, were all ignored.

Those involved in the security business want a slice of the publicity. The Queensland premier, Campbell Newman, is effusive in declaring that his state can nip the terrorist plan in bud and operation. Morrison has been happy to soften the ground.

Hyperbole is the order of the day, all the more so, given the upcoming G20 summit in November. Seventeen items will be prohibited without “lawful excuse”, be they eggs, glass jars, reptiles or insects. (Ah, that old Australian killer animal trick.) The occasion has induced the Queensland police minister, Jack Dempsey, to have a special leave of mental lucidness. Convicted criminals, he has suggested, will be moved away from restricted zones. The result? A possible holiday for felons on the tax payer's already extended purse.[2]

This may all be some scrappy reflex to the September 11 commemorations, a date which has seen a tradition of declaring “high” terror alerts in anticipation of some celebrating act of Islamic violence. On Tuesday, the outgoing domestic intelligence spy chief David Irvine seemed left out from the fun his counterparts were having in other countries connected with the Five Eyes arrangement. After all, if the UK Prime Minister David Cameron can increase a “terror alert”, why can't we?

The entire spectacle is suspect – treating terror alerts like a cookery class; turning the level from medium to high if the dish of poor policy options requires it. In Irvine’s own kitchen language, the current threat was “a very elevated level of medium”.[3] Not likely to be sufficient, he was “certainly contemplating very seriously the notion of lifting it higher because of the numbers of people that we are having to be concerned about here in Australia.” If Irvine is not careful, such heat is bound to dry out the contents of his dish.

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Notes

[1]

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/australian-law-helps-keep-assad-in-power-20130505-2j11y.html>

[2] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-30/qld-parliament-passes-g20-security-laws/5056952>

[3]

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/australia-terror-threat-level-could-go-up-says-asio-head-david-irvine/story-fn59niix-1227053069395>

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