



REPORT

Typology of Terror —
The Backgrounds of
Australian Jihadis

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2012 several hundred Australians have travelled to Syria and Iraq to undertake jihad with Islamic State, al-Qaeda or other radical Islamist groups.¹ Dozens more provided financial support to them or other jihadis, or planned, conducted or supported terrorist attacks in Australia on behalf of Islamic State.

While a small number of Australians had previously been involved in terrorism campaigns, including training with jihadi groups overseas or planning terrorist attacks in Australia, the scale of this episode of jihadism has been unprecedented. As with previous jihadis, the contemporary cohort was motivated by the Islamist narrative of fighting oppression and seeking revenge for the perceived humiliation of the global Muslim community or *umma*. However, this time they were given an additional motivation: establishing and defending the physical caliphate which Islamic State had proclaimed in June 2014 across swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq. Islamic State's jihadist campaign was supported by a sophisticated and broad-ranging multilingual social media messaging capability that gave Islamic State greater reach than any radical Islamist group that preceded it.²

While the caliphate is no longer, the ideology that gave rise to Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and a range of other radical Islamist groups, remains. In an increasingly interconnected world, the impact of social media on the construction of individual identities and the willingness to place ideological loyalties above national loyalties is likely to continue. There is no indication that the siren call of jihad has been silenced. It is therefore necessary to understand the backgrounds of those Australians who have undertaken jihad in order to better discern the typologies and motivations of those who are likely to be attracted to similar messaging in the future.

METHODOLOGY

This study is the first phase of an ongoing project to document the characteristics of Australians' contribution to global jihad in the Islamic State era. To date we have collected data on 173 Australian citizens and residents known to have joined radical Islamist terrorist organisations or who have been charged with terrorism offences. Given the nature of the subject matter, the data sets collected for each of the subject areas may be incomplete, although the size of the data sets for each subject area is noted in this Working Paper and reflected in the digital version.

The data comes from a range of sources: documents related to terrorism trials; media reports; individuals' social media profiles; publicly available information such as business and charity registration data; and associated interviews with journalists, government and law enforcement officials. The study will be updated as additional data becomes available from further terrorism trials and new information about foreign fighters is uncovered.

The following are some particular methodological aspects of this research project:

- Generally, no distinction has been made between those who travelled to undertake jihad and those convicted of domestic terrorist offences. The focus of this study is to discern motivation rather than role. The evidence indicates that those who financed foreign terrorist fighters or facilitated their actions in other ways believed themselves just as committed to jihad as were the fighters. And in many cases it is an artificial divide. Australian authorities cancelled or refused passports to a number of individuals who then resorted to planning attacks in Australia because they had been prevented from travelling. Nearly half of those charged or convicted of terrorism offences in Australia have had their passports cancelled or refused, and a number cited those cancellations or refusals as their motivation for attacking targets in Australia.
- The paper's conclusions on mental health and terrorism, and evaluations of causal links between terrorist acts and the mental health of accused terrorists, are based solely on the findings of the judge or coroner in each case. They are the only ones who are exposed to all the evidence and objectively weigh up mental health specialists' views.
- The data set includes minors, but only those who have been convicted of a terrorism offence in Australia, who travelled to Syria or Iraq willingly, or who subsequently became an active supporter of Islamic State once there. Minors taken by their parents and who had no active role with Islamic State or children born in Syria or Iraq are not included in the figures.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA SET

GENDER, AGE AND FAMILY BACKGROUNDS

A common perception of Islamist terrorists is that they are overwhelmingly young, male, poorly educated, unemployed or on welfare, and from broken homes. Our analysis shows that this is not a particularly accurate picture of the Australian cohort. On the issue of gender, the balance among the cohort does lean strongly male: 85 per cent of the 173 individuals were male and only 15 per cent female. Accurate figures relating to the proportion of women as part of the worldwide cohort joining Islamic State in Iraq and Syria are difficult to come by; claims vary from ten per cent to nearly a third.³ There is little evidence that any of the adult (and in some cases minor) women who have been charged with domestic terrorism offences in Australia or detained in Syria were any less ideologically committed to the terrorist group than were their husbands or family members,⁴ so the concept of 'jihadi or ISIS bride' as a reluctant traveller without agency is largely inaccurate, at least with respect to this data set.

Among the 149 individuals in the data set whose ages are known, there are as many people over 35 years of age (8 per cent) as there are under the age of 18 (7 per cent). This finding challenges the popular conception that attraction to radical Islamism causes decreases with age. Still, the average age is around 25 (men 25.1, women 23.4), which means that most Islamist terrorists in the Australian context are young adults. This is remarkably similar to other Western countries' experience. In the United States, the average age of domestic terrorists charged with offences related to Islamic State is 28,⁵ and a study of Islamic State foreign fighter registration documents showed that the average age at the time of joining the organisation was between 26 and 27.⁶

Around the same percentage of terrorists were single as were married (around 45 per cent), and less than 10 per cent were divorcees. Given that the average age at marriage for males in Australia in 2017 was 32, and the average age of male terrorists in the data set was 25, the large proportion of those who were married would indicate that attachment to spouses and families is not enough to dissuade someone from taking part in a high-risk activity such as terrorism.⁷

The marriage statistics for the terrorist cohort include those both legally and Islamically married at the time of their offending (domestic terrorists) or when they left the country to travel to Syria or Iraq (foreign fighters). There is anecdotal and court evidence that jihadists inhabit quite restricted social circles and prefer those with similar ideological outlooks. This includes family groups who radicalise within and often marry into like-minded families, so it is unsurprising that the partners of terrorists are often passive, if not active, supporters of their radical Islamist ideology. Although

not addressed in detail here, the influence of the family in the radicalisation process is apparent given that at least 44 people comprising 19 sets of siblings feature in the terrorist database. In other words, siblings account for a quarter of all known contemporary Australian jihadis.

INTEGRATION, COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AND GENERATIONAL IMPACT

The definition of integration into a society is subjective and highly contested.⁸ As a result it is difficult to measure. Some studies may use employment or education as markers of integration while other academic studies have used intermarriage between ethnic groups as a measure because ‘...it is an important indicator of immigrant integration into the host society.’ Such academic research shows that intermarriage between ethnic groups increases from first to second, then second to third generation, generated by an increased social interaction between successive generations.⁹

Integration is a much less subjective concept in terrorism studies. The very actions of individuals in joining or supporting terrorist groups that have threatened and attacked Australia demonstrate that foreign terrorist fighters or those convicted of domestic terrorism offences are not integrated into the Australian community. It is therefore useful to conduct a generational analysis of those who have joined radical Islamist groups to determine whether the length of time living in a liberal democracy affects the likelihood of an individual supporting jihad against their country of nationality or residence.

The data set shows that of the 133 individuals whose countries of birth are known, 88 were born in Australia. When their parents’ birthplaces (those that are known) are factored in, 34 per cent of the jihadis are first generation Australians, 60 per cent are second-generation and only six per cent are third-generation (nearly all of whom are Anglo-Celtic converts to Islam). This spike in second-generation terrorists is at odds with a linear ‘progression’ of integration as measured by intermarriage, that is, the assumption that the longer one lives in a country the more integrated one becomes. Given the source countries of the individuals involved, the low number of third-generation jihadis may be a consequence either of the relatively recent immigration flows into Australia from some countries, or of an increased level of integration of families resident in Australia for three generations or more.

Determining the reasons why more second-generation immigrants are drawn to radical Islamism than those born outside the country is outside the scope of this Working Paper but warrants much closer examination. The finding that second-generation immigrants feature more heavily in radical Islamism is not unique to Australia. In France, second-generation immigrants account for 60 per cent of Islamist terrorists¹⁰ and the pattern is repeated elsewhere in Europe.¹¹

The data on country of origin also supports a conclusion that attraction to jihad in Syria had little to do with familial connection to, or national loyalty to Syria or Iraq — only eight per cent had been born or had at least one parent born in either country. The main source country for Australian jihadis was Lebanon, from where 40 per cent of individuals or at least one of their parents originated.¹² By comparison, Lebanese Australians represent between 15-20 per cent of Australia's Muslim population.¹³ First- or second-generation Afghans represent about nine per cent, Turks eight per cent and Somalis six per cent of the known Australian terrorist cohort.

The study also looks at the refugee background of jihadis. There has been some, albeit limited, media coverage of terrorist acts committed by refugees.¹⁴ A linkage between refugees and terrorism has subsequently been proffered by a range of Western politicians and commentators including President Trump in the United States, Prime Minister of Poland Beata Szydlo and French politician Marine Le Pen.¹⁵ The issue was briefly aired in Australia as a result of a Senate estimates question from Senator Pauline Hanson in which she asked the Director-General of Security whether "...the [terrorism] threat is being brought in ... by Middle Eastern refugees that are coming out to Australia." The Director-General responded that he had "absolutely no evidence to suggest there is a connection between refugees and terrorism."¹⁶

Determining what, if any, connection exists between refugee families and terrorist activity is difficult. Privacy laws restrict access to information about the categories of visas granted to new arrivals, such as those who entered Australia as refugees, those granted protection after arrival in Australia, or those who entered the country as the family member of someone granted protection. Courts are under no obligation to comment on the type of visa that an immigrant found guilty of terrorism offences used to enter the country. However, in this study, refugees (first- and second-generation) account for just six per cent of the total number of terrorists in the data set, supporting the Director-General's account of the lack of connection between refugees and terrorism.

The role of converts within the Australian terrorist milieu has been little discussed. Although numbers vary from country to country, the Australian experience appears to differ from that of other Western countries in terms of the relatively low number of converts involved in terrorism activities. In Australia, converts constitute just over 8 per cent of the total cohort. By comparison, studies in the United States and Europe have found rates in excess of 20 per cent converts as a proportion of the total foreign fighter cohort.¹⁷

HOME LIFE AND CRIMINAL RECORDS

The stereotype of the terrorist as a criminal from a broken home is also not reflective of the Australian experience. Of the 96 terrorists whose

parents' family status is known, 61 per cent come from families in which both parents were alive and together at the time of offending, compared with 39 per cent from single parent households. So while on one hand the Australian jihadis in the data set were less likely to come from broken homes than those whose parents' marriages were intact, family life may be a factor in Australian jihadism given the instance of one-parent households is nearly three times the Australian national average of 14 per cent.¹⁸

Australia's jihadis are geographically highly concentrated. Around 90 per cent lived in either Sydney and or Melbourne, with over 60 per cent more living in Sydney than in Melbourne. And within these cities there was a heavy concentration in particular suburbs — in Sydney they were located in the western suburbs and in Melbourne there were distinct northern and southern groups. This reflects both the fact that Australian migrants tend to gravitate to Australia's two largest cities and that inside these cities radical Islamists tend to live near each other for ease of religious and social association. This location data also reflects the prevalence of family groups, given that siblings often cohabit or live close together.

The question of criminal records is an interesting one. Access to police and court records is a research challenge, as is the question of classifying the degree of an individual's prior criminality. For example, motor vehicle or traffic offences are not equivalent to violent crimes involving imprisonment. The level of criminality is important, as it would be dubious to mount an argument that religious redemption was a motivating factor for someone guilty only of traffic or driving offences.

With that in mind we have classified 'major' offences as those involving violence or gaol time, and 'minor' offences as less serious infractions such as traffic offences. Based on this classification, of the 106 individuals whose criminal records are known, 65 per cent had no prior record. Of the 35 per cent who did have some police record, two-thirds of them had only minor offences on their record and one third had a major criminal conviction.

This stands in stark contrast to some European studies that have identified a strong crime-terrorism nexus. A German study reported a criminality rate of 66 per cent amongst its foreign fighters and another in the Netherlands found 64 per cent with criminal records amongst a broader cross-section of jihadis that included failed and potential travellers to Syria and Iraq.¹⁹ A French study of 78 terrorists in French and Belgian cells found that nearly 50 per cent had been previously arrested by police,²⁰ and a UK study of 79 terrorists found that at least 57 per cent had spent time in prison.²¹

The explanations for this disparity are varied. Some are methodological: a number of studies have only examined foreign terrorist fighters or those who have launched terrorist attacks in Europe. By contrast, this Lowy Institute study examines both Australian foreign fighters and those who have been charged with a terrorist offence in Australia. While the

Australian sample size is larger and sets a lower threshold for assessing criminality by including minor offences, this makes the lower level of criminality observed amongst the Australian jihadist group even more marked.

The crime-terror nexus observed in Europe does not appear to apply in the Australian context. Almost 90 per cent of the Australian terrorists in the data set have either no or minor police records. The 'jihadi in pursuit of salvation' argument therefore holds little weight. However, the over-representation of individuals from single parent families compared with the national average is an important feature of the Australian data set, pointing to sociological issues and a 'sense of belonging' as having greater impact on the attraction of individuals to jihadism than the idea of religious salvation.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT LEVELS

Of the 81 people in the data set whose education background is known, 27 per cent had not completed high school, almost exactly the rate for the rest of Australia.²² Of the high schools they attended, 73 per cent were state high schools (slightly higher than the national average of 66 per cent), 17 per cent private Islamic schools and 6 per cent non-Islamic private schools. Sixteen per cent of the individuals had completed tertiary study (less than the Australian average of 24 per cent).²³ However, 27 per cent of those who had commenced tertiary education had dropped out either before committing to Islamic State or in order to do so. That rate is slightly above the national tertiary drop-out rate of around 20 per cent.²⁴

A striking finding on jihadis' educational background is that of those who attended university and whose chosen courses are known, only three (representing around 10 per cent of those who began tertiary courses) studied generalist degrees in the humanities rather than science-related or vocational degrees. There is no evidence that those science-related or vocational degrees were chosen specifically for the purpose of aiding jihad. However, the data on jihadis' tertiary choices may well support a conclusion that the greater the exposure to a liberal arts education that seeks to promote critical thinking, the less likely individuals are to be attracted to a rigid and intolerant ideological concept such as radical Islamism. This is an area worthy of further examination.

The findings on employment status also make for interesting domestic and international comparisons. Overall, 21 per cent of the individuals in the data set were still students, 17 per cent were unemployed or receiving social welfare, 45 per cent were in blue collar jobs, 11 per cent in white collar jobs and 6 per cent had professional careers. Relating these numbers to the national averages for employment by sector, it is notable that of all jihadis in employment, the proportion who were in blue collar jobs (73 per cent, or 53 of the 73 employed) is more than double the national rate (just over 30 per cent).²⁵

Of those Australian jihadis who were not employed, even allowing for individuals who may have been unable to work and receiving social welfare, the unemployment rate of the terrorist cohort (17 per cent) is still well over the 6 per cent national unemployment rate in 2014 (the year Islamic State proclaimed its caliphate).²⁶ So, while most terrorists appear to have been employed prior to leaving Australia or committing their crime, their unemployment rate was greater than the national rate and they were more than twice as likely to work in blue-collar jobs compared with the general population.

Overseas studies vary significantly in their findings on these factors. A World Bank study of foreign fighters found that 27 per cent reported having no job (including being retired);²⁷ a study of Jordanian foreign fighters showed around 20 per cent of recruits were unemployed;²⁸ a French study found an unemployment rate of 36 per cent amongst their jihadis.²⁹ Relative to the rest of their own society however, the Australian terrorists are more likely to be on social welfare or occupy lower status employment positions. An attraction to Islamic State may therefore have been influenced by a desire to increase personal status.

Occupying for the most part lower status roles in secular Australian society, Australian jihadis may have been attracted to the empowerment and high religious status Islamic State offers martyrs. In Islam, martyrs are believed to occupy the highest levels of paradise after death and to be able to intercede on behalf of their relatives on the Day of Judgment. Based on court records of terrorist trials and an abundance of anecdotal evidence, martyrdom and its benefits are constant leitmotifs in jihadis conversations.

MENTAL HEALTH

Some families and community groups are wont to sheet home responsibility for terrorist crimes to 'mental health issues' on the part of the offender. For community groups it removes religious identity as a possible motivating factor for a terrorist incident, avoiding the need to look too deeply at the 'influencers' whose speeches and writings may have inspired an individual's actions. The same applies to families, although given the personal stakes it perhaps also allows them to explain the inexplicable to themselves and others.

Measuring the impact of mental illnesses or disorders on jihadis, or evaluating the degree to which mental health was a factor in terrorist offences, is challenging. Legally, the definition of a 'mental health issue' is contentious, as is the issue of causation: that is, whether the individual met the legal definition of individual responsibility by knowing 'right from wrong' at the time they committed the offence.

Given the regulation of personal data and privacy, it is also difficult to obtain reliable data on the presence or impact of mental health issues on

terrorist offenders. Some studies have used media reports and other data to assess the presence of mental health issues in terrorist cases.³⁰ The dangers of such a methodology are readily apparent. By contrast, this Lowy Institute study uses data from Australian legal decisions to determine the presence and impact (if any) of mental health issues on terrorists and their actions. In these cases, claims relating mental health to terrorist acts have been evaluated and tested by a judge, either in sentencing hearings or in referring evidence to a jury in a jury trial.

There have only been two instances to date in Australia of a defendant pleading mental impairment in defence of a terrorism charge. These were Ihsas Khan, accused of a knife attack on a man in Sydney's western suburbs, and Moudasser Taleb, charged with attempting to travel to Syria to join Islamic State. The defence in both cases was unsuccessful and juries found both men guilty in their separate trials. Khan received 36 years in prison and Taleb a five-year good behaviour bond. The defence in both cases was unsuccessful and juries found both men guilty in their separate trials. Khan received 36 years in prison and Taleb a five-year good behaviour bond.³¹

The data from these legal decisions indicates that mental health plays a very minor role in Islamist terrorism. Of the 40 individual cases for which legal judgments regarding the impact of mental health are available, defence counsel made claims during sentencing hearings in 13 cases that mental health considerations were relevant in determining the appropriate sentence. In only three of those cases (7.5 per cent) did the judge accept that mental health issues should be taken into account during sentencing.

FATE OF AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS, WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The identities of Australian foreign fighters are still being uncovered, as is their fate and/or whereabouts, and it is likely that our information about them will never be complete. Of the 105 foreign terrorist fighters identified in this study, more than half have been killed, the status of one in five is unknown and around one in six (17 per cent) are currently held in Syrian detention camps. Another three have been detained or convicted overseas and five have returned to Australia and been charged or convicted.

The tracking, and in some cases the identification, of Australian jihadi children is difficult. Some children were taken from Australia to Syria; some were born in Syria to Australian jihadi parents; others were born to an Australian mother and a foreign jihadi father; others were born to an Australian jihadi father and a foreign jihadi or local Syrian or Iraqi mother. In some instances, jihadis may have informally adopted children and/or had multiple partners of differing nationalities. This makes the definition, let alone tracking, of 'Australian jihadi children' difficult.

Of those children born to one or two Australian jihadi parents (or to an under-age, non-jihadi mother), at the time of writing thirty-six (66 per cent) are held at camps in Syria, nine children have been returned to Australia and another ten were killed during fighting in Syria or Iraq. The circumstances of each family group are different and it is difficult to develop a single domestic policy approach to the issue. Establishing a coherent international approach is even more challenging.

CONTRITION AND REHABILITATION

The question of whether jihadi are repentant for their actions and to what degree, is, like the issue of mental health, for the courts to determine. This is also the case for their prospects for rehabilitation. From the available data, however, it is apparent that Australian courts have been unimpressed by the level of contrition shown by those convicted of terrorist offences and are generally pessimistic about their prospects for rehabilitation.

Indeed, less than 10 per cent of offenders in the data set have been found to be truly contrite for their crimes, and around 29 per cent have been judged to have good prospects for rehabilitation. This illustrates the problems that correctional services and government face in attempting to de-radicalise incarcerated jihadis who see little wrong with their actions and who show meagre prospects of rehabilitation.

CONCLUSION

This study seeks to document and analyse a range of selected characteristics of Australian jihadis in the era of Islamic State. The actions of these people have understandably shocked and disappointed mainstream Australian society, and attitudes towards them and their motivations have been formed based largely on anecdotal evidence and incomplete media reporting. This Working Paper sheds light on the phenomenon by collating selected data in order to give a better understanding of the backgrounds of people drawn to jihad from within a multicultural, liberal democratic society.

The study is a starting point in the recording of this data. While the sample size is large and much has been gleaned from the information gathered to date, further data will emerge in the future. This will be accommodated in the *Typology of Terror* live digital portal that accompanies this paper at <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/typology-of-terror/>, and the results updated as the data is received.

THE 'AVERAGE' AUSTRALIAN JIHADI

Although there is no such thing as an 'average' Australian jihadi, if we were to construct one from the aggregated data, they would likely have many of the following characteristics:

- a. Male
- b. Mid 20s
- c. Lives in Sydney
- d. Is or has been married
- e. Born in Australia to overseas-born parents who are still married (with one or both from Lebanon)
- f. No prior criminal record
- g. Completed high school at a government school
- h. Employed in a blue-collar job
- i. No mental health issues
- j. Not contrite and judged to have relatively poor prospects of rehabilitation

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NOTES

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⁵ George Washington University, Program on Extremism, “GW Extremism Tracker: Terrorism in the United States”, September 2019 Update, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/gw-extremism-tracker>.

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⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Olivier Roy, ‘Can we Understand the Motives of Jihadists?’, *Pouvoir*, No. 158, March 2016, 19.

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¹² Calculations cited here differ slightly from the data presented on the *Typology of Terror* “Family Backgrounds” map because they include mixed parentage country of origin, which cannot be clearly depicted on a map.

¹³ This is an approximate figure. In the 2016 census, 231 000 people identified as having Lebanese ancestry (with 79 000 born in Lebanon) of whom 40 per cent were Muslim (all sects). The same census put the Muslim population (all sects) at 604 000: Australian Bureau of Statistics, “3415.0 - Migrant Data Matrices, 2018: Population Characteristics”,

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¹⁴ David Crowe and Rosie Lewis, “PoliticsNow: Rolling News, Pictures, Analysis from Canberra”, *The Australian*, 31 May 2017,

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