

Confronting the terrorism threat: A national  
research institute for counter-terrorism  
by Anthony Bergin

4

1 February 2007

It's clear that the terrorist threat is changing, not just because of our successes, but because of the terrorists' own resiliency. The persistence of terrorists and their capacity to innovate was highlighted in August last year in the alleged plot to blow up multiple US-bound transatlantic airlines using liquid explosive.

Australians or Australian interests have been the target of a planned or conducted terrorist attack every year since 2001. The threat is real, and it is growing. As the nature of the terrorist threat evolves over time and adapts to our counter-terrorism operations and policies, we need to nurture our own expertise in this field. We need an Australian national institute to provide a focal point for research and policy innovation in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

### The ongoing threat

Al-Qaeda has proved an adaptable opponent. It's harder to disrupt because its structure is now flatter and more networked, combining both a top-down and bottom-up approach to terrorist operations. As *The Economist* headlined their recent analysis of al-Qaeda, it's 'on the march, not on the run'.

It rebounded from the loss of Afghanistan to become a transnational movement, unified in its belief that the West is hostile to Islam and that violent jihad is the only option.

While a significant element of al-Qaeda's leadership has been eliminated, it has successfully managed the transition to new leaders. Threats and attacks continue and it maintains the capacity to carry out major attacks. Its leaders' message inspires individuals to carry out mass murder and suicide. Al-Qaeda is still infiltrating our region and directing resources into recruitment and radicalisation, including Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia.

JI has also been damaged but not eliminated and remains dangerous. Key figures such as Noordin Top remain at large. The southern Philippines has become JI's major training base.

The Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines has changed from a criminal group to become a jihadist organisation and has a continuing capacity to conduct terrorist operations.

There are growing concerns that Muslim separatists in southern Thailand could be joined by militant Muslims from outside the country to turn that nationalist insurgency into a jihadist conflict.

Terrorists have shown themselves adept at exploiting failing states. There are no terrorist groups operating in the Pacific islands. In the medium term, however, there are worrying signs of state failure that could make the region a platform for terrorist activity or a source of resources for terrorists.

It is evident from the recent terrorist attacks in New York, London, Paris and Madrid that the modern cosmopolitan city has facilitated a sui generis environment attractive to alienated youth. They are sometimes, but not exclusively, from a diasporic background. The common ideology is Islamism and its recruits undertake acts of violence in the name of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Its strategy is mass casualty or catastrophic terror.

More worrying is that terrorist groups will increasingly be able to get hold of and use chemical, biological or radiological weapons. We know that terrorists are interested in such weapons.

In many cases terrorists are expressly targeting Australians and Australian interests and are capable of mass casualty attacks that could have serious security and social impacts for Australia. The terrorist threat to national security will be with us for some time to come.

### **Australian terrorism research**

There are a small number of non-government bodies in Australia with a research interest in terrorism and counter-terrorism. In the university sector there is a new centre for Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism (PICT) at Macquarie University, focused mainly on education and training needs. There is a small terrorism research unit at Monash University. The Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University (ANU) has undertaken work on terrorism. The University of Wollongong hosts a transnational crime prevention centre that touches on the links between crime and terrorism related issues, although like PICT it is focused mainly on professional training. The ANU recently established a National Centre for Biosecurity whose interests include, but are not limited to, bioterrorism.

An announcement on a consortia of Australian universities that will host an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded centre of excellence in policing and security is expected later this year. It would be surprising if this ARC centre of excellence does not include some research on terrorism related issues as part of its mission.

A small group of individual social and behavioural scientists through the Australian university system undertake terrorism related research and certainly there has been a growth in undergraduate and to a lesser extent, post-graduate courses in the subject since 9/11. Since 2002 the government has included national security as one of its four ARC research priorities, which has stimulated research work in this area.

Around a dozen large ARC grants have been made to study international terrorism, although homegrown terrorism has been largely neglected. The government has also funded the Research Network for a Secure Australia (RNSA), a multi-disciplinary collaboration established to strengthen Australia's

research capacity for protecting critical infrastructure from natural or human caused disasters, including terrorist acts. The RNSA does not undertake research, but rather is a knowledge-sharing network for research organisations, government and the private sector to develop research tools to mitigate emerging safety and security issues relating to critical infrastructure. The Australian Government promotes collaboration on science and technology research related to terrorism through the National Security Science and Technology Unit in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Outside the universities, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, the Lowy Institute and the Australian Institute of Criminology have devoted some efforts to produce research on terrorism. The non-government Australian Homeland Security Research Centre analyses domestic responses to terrorism, albeit alongside domestic preparedness for natural hazards, such as pandemics. It mainly facilitates a range of national security related professional development events.

### **The need for a national institute**

While there has been some good terrorism research undertaken in Australia by a variety of individuals and organisations, unfortunately much of the research funded through the Australian Research Council in the social sciences has taken a critical or anti-government approach to understanding the terrorist threat. Both the public and the government have been poorly served by the current state of terrorism research in Australia. There is no focal point for strategic thinking and research innovation in this field. In countering terrorism, policy makers should have the most solid research information to work with and so timely advice to counter-terrorism professionals in government, based on rigorous research, is critical.

There does not exist any centre or institute that is solely focused on research outcomes designed to strengthen domestic security and to assist Australian authorities protect the nation against the full spectrum of terrorist activities.

In broad terms a national institute would draw together the best information and thinking on terrorism and counter-terrorism from Australian researchers and international bodies in order to provide policy advice to government, business and the community on how to counter terrorist threats and respond and recover from a range of attack scenarios. \*\*

A national institute for counter-terrorism would provide national research leadership on terrorism and counter-terrorism related issues and would promote the most effective counter-terrorism strategies for Australia.

The institute would have its own in-house researchers, commission research in the field to improve policy and analyse the future needs of government, the private sector and the community to build an effective nation-wide counter-terrorism capability.

The institute could provide resources on the most recent findings from research and host events that would highlight best practices. It would have an important role in developing links and maintaining relationships between Australia and like-minded overseas research bodies.

\*\*It is interesting to note here the suggestion made in a 2005 ASPI Strategy Report on terrorism in Indonesia that the government could consider the possibility of setting up or funding of an institute located in the region to undertake innovative research on security and strategic issues. See Greg Fealy and Aldo Borgu *Local Jihad: Radical Islam and Terrorism in Indonesia* (ASPI 2005) p.79

The institute should focus its research efforts on those terrorist organisations that pose a clear danger to Australia, including recruitment, organisation and terrorist group dynamics. Research should focus on the pace and trajectory of radicalisation and indoctrination that has occurred in Melbourne and Sydney and identify effective intervention strategies to mitigate home grown jihadis evolving an operational capacity.

It would also focus on responses to and recovery from terrorist attacks in an Australian setting, particularly on how to enhance resilience in the face of the terror threat. The institute's research here would assist in preparing and coordinating efforts to assist victims and speed recovery. The institute could identify where Australia's vulnerabilities reside, assist in the prioritisation of countermeasures to terrorism and identify areas where investments are likely to be most effective. It might assist in developing a national capabilities plan for counter-terrorism agencies in the same way Defence has its own military procurement plan. It might assist industry with information on expected capability needs. While not undertaking a training and education role itself, the institute could assist in identifying educational and training needs in counter-terrorism.

### **Options**

An institute could take a variety of forms. The simplest option would be as an information hub that would act as a clearing house for research by collating information on terrorism related issues from a variety of open sources. The institute could disseminate such information to a wide range of stakeholders, much of it on-line. It would not drive research initiatives nor would it undertake its own research work or commission research.

A second option would be an institute that would have a strategic role in undertaking and commissioning research. The institute could be established by government calling for bids from tertiary institutions or from university consortia, as is now done with the Cooperative Research Centres (CRC's). The CRCs are organised around a 'hub and spokes' model. Alternatively the institute could be established as a stand-alone body.

The information hub model, while cheaper than the other options, would not be able build policy capacity in counter-terrorism nor nurture research expertise because of its lack of research capability.

A strategic research model based at a university might offer some cost savings as the hosting body might be asked to contribute funding or in-kind support to host the institute. On the other hand, a university based institute may risk losing the key policy focus that would need to drive the research agenda. Unfortunately much terrorism related research in Australia, especially in the social sciences, has not demonstrated clearly any immediate, short or long term direct application to counter-terrorism policy or capabilities.

Given the proposed role of the institute as offering policy advice based on mission oriented research, the most appropriate model is a stand-alone body structured as a not-for-profit company. This would allow it to have its own identity and provide distance from government so it can operate with a reasonable degree of independence. A stand-alone body is more likely to achieve results, leveraging research resources so that benefits accrue to Australian counter-terrorism practitioners as quickly as possible.

The proposed new institute could be named the *Research Institute for Counter-Terrorism* or perhaps simply *Safeguarding Australia*. The latter suggests the role of the institute in terms of its desirable research outcomes.

It would need to have strong links to the Australian Government and state and territory governments. Based on the role of the institute, likely staff needs and the budgets of similar bodies, the cost of establishing the institute and operating it for the first five years would be between \$15-20 million. This is a relatively small sum in the context of a total of \$8.3 billion in additional funding that has been committed since 2001 to boost those Australian agencies tasked with countering the terrorist threat.

As an initiative of the Australian Government and as the proposed institute would have a national role and operate in a policy area where the Australian Government is the leading player, initial funding should come from the Australian Government.

It is possible, given the national role for the institute, that state and territory governments may offer funding or in-kind support. After all, the states would be on the frontline in any terrorist attack here. Business is also involved in counter-terrorism not just in protecting assets but also in developing innovative products and services for countering terrorism. Thus private sector stakeholders might also support the institute.

Consideration may need to be given to locate the proposed institute in Melbourne or Sydney in order to send a direct message that the largest number of engaged citizens are pivotal to Australia's counter-terrorism policies and practices.

### **Concluding remarks**

The proposed institute could make a significant contribution to Australia's counter-terrorism policy and capabilities and act as a focal point for innovation in the face of an evolving terrorist threat. The Australian Government should consider funding a feasibility study into the establishment of a national institute for counter-terrorism.

### **About the Author**

Dr Anthony Bergin is ASPI's Director of Research Programs

### **About Policy Analysis**

Generally written by ASPI experts, **POLICY ANALYSIS** is provided online to give readers timely, insightful opinion pieces on current strategic issues, with clear policy recommendations when appropriate. They reflect the personal views of the author and do not in any way express or reflect the views of the Australian Government or represent the formal position of ASPI on any particular issue.

ASPI  
Tel + 61 2 6270 5100  
Fax + 61 2 6273 9566  
Email [enquiries@aspi.org.au](mailto:enquiries@aspi.org.au)  
Web [www.aspi.org.au](http://www.aspi.org.au)

© The Australian Strategic Policy Institute Limited 2007

This publication is subject to copyright. Except as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part of it may in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, microcopying, photocopying, recording or otherwise) be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted without prior written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publishers.