AUSTRALIA: ANTI-MUSLIM SENTIMENTS INCREASE AMIDST GROWING CONCERNS OVER THE RADICALIZATION OF CITIZENS

By
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Religious tensions have grown within Australia amidst concerns about radicalization of citizens and possible extremist activities occurring in the country. This has led to a strong response by police, anti-Muslim activists, and also Muslim communities, who are increasingly concerned about Australia's treatment of Muslims.

Radicalization has become a significant concern particularly with the Islamic State and their pervasive international recruitment. So far, at least 60 Australians are thought to be fighting alongside the IS in Iraq and Syria, with 20 others having already returned from the Middle East. Additionally, over 100 citizens are thought to be actively working to support the terrorist group from their home. On January 9, 2015 two suspects were arrested in Sydney by the Australian security forces, on accusations of being involved in various terrorist activities, such as supporting foreign fighters in conflicts such as in Syria and in Iraq. Few weeks before, two other suspects in possession of documents related to a planned terrorist attack against governmental targets were arrested in Sydney on December 24.

According to a Muslim student activist, Fatema Ali, this kind of radical ideology is being spread in extremist schools and Islamic centers. One example of these centers is the Many Street Dawah Movement, which proselytizes Muslim beliefs. While the movement itself is not inherently radical, it has been described as the "key breeding ground for radical young Australians".

On October 15, pro-Islamic State grafitti was found throughout the East Hills Boys High School in Panania, New South Wales. Among the messages were "ISIS Beheads" and "ISIS R Coming". According to a teacher at the school, some students at the school were linked to the Street Dawah movement and had openly voiced their support for the Islamic State.

Many of the Australians fighting abroad are also thought to be members of, or have links to, the Street Dawah Movement. One of the leaders of the Street Dawah Movement was Mohammad Ali Baryalei, a wanted terrorist who has since been killed while fighting for the Islamic State. He served as a link for many Sydney-based recruiters and facilitated the passage of many Australian jihadists into Syria. He is thought to have enabled the passage of at least 30 Australians. As a recruiter, he maintained many of his links with the Street Dawah. For example, Baryalei allegedly recruited 17-year-old Abdullah Elmir, who is also known as the "ginger jihadist" and is featured in many Islamic State propaganda videos urging terrorist attacks against Australia and other Western targets. Baryalei also reportedly advised Omarjan Azari, 22, to kidnap and kill a random member of the public on camera, mimicking the style of the IS in the beheadings of western hostages in Syria.

There has also been an increase in successfully perpetrated terrorist attacks carried out in Australia. On September 23, an 18-year-old jihadist, Abdul Numan Haider, stabbed 2 counter-terrorism officers before being fatally shot at a police station on the outskirts of Melbourne. He carried out this attack before his routine interview, as he was a "known terror suspect". A week before the attack, Haider displayed a flag linked to the Islamic State at a local shopping mal and had his passport cancelled on security grounds.

On December 15, Islamic radical Man Haron Monis took 17 people hostage at the Lindt Chocolate Café in Martin Place in Sydney, New South Wales. He had announced on his website on November 17 that he had abandoned Shia Islam and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. His siege of the café lasted roughly 16 hours, during which much of downtown Sydney was blockaded. The hostage crisis ended when police stormed the café, leading to the death of Monis and 2 of the hostages. While this incident was not Australia's first experience with terrorism, it was the most

significant in recent years, garnering extremely strong domestic and international support for those affected.

These incidents and reports of radicalization have led to a firm response by Australian authorities. In response to the number of Australians who have joined the Islamic State, an extra $630 million was allocated to various agencies in August in order to improve counter-terrorism activities and border patrol. Then, on September 12, the government increased the terrorist threat level from "medium" to "high", the second highest level. On October 30, Australia's parliament passed the Foreign Fighter Bill, which provides means to strengthen border security, boost powers of security agencies, and criminalizes the encouragement or promotion of terrorist acts. The newly-passed law would also make it simpler for authorities to detain terrorist suspects and search their homes.

Additionally, police and intelligence agencies have increased their efforts to locate terrorists within Australia. After intercepting a phone call between Mohammed Baryalei and Omarjan Azari planning a terrorist attack against civilians, the police conducted the largest ever counter-terrorism raids in Australian history. On September 18, Australian authorities arrested 15 suspects believed to be involved in these "demonstration killings" in several Australian cities. 7 out of 15 of the suspects were allegedly also members of the Street Dawah movement. Further terrorism raids were also carried out in several homes in Sydney on December 18 as a part of the continuing anti-terrorism operation. Several properties were targeted during both of these raids.

In addition to this police crackdown against Islamic radicalism, the general population has grown more wary of this potential threat. However, this has also lead to an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment among Australians. For example, Australians believe the proportion of Muslims in their country is 9 times higher than it actually is, indicating that fears of Islamic fundamentalism are potentially overinflated.

Islamic leaders in Queensland reported in September that they were being targeted by more hate crimes than usual following the increase in the terror threat level. A spokesman for a Logan mosque reported that someone left pamphlets, containing

abusive language and photographs, outside the mosque on September 13. These pamphlets also threatened that Australian Muslims were not welcome in the country.

This mindset and fear has led to an increasing number of hate crimes against mosques. On November 12, a Muslim man was punched in the face and racially taunted as he left a prayer service at a mosque in Wallsend, Newcastle. The same mosque was targeted again a week later on November 19, when a pig's head was thrown at the entrance. On November 17, vandals threw white paint on the entrance of a local mosque in Perth. The Masjid Ibrahim Islamic Mosque in Perth was also targeted on November 24, when pig remains were thrown at it. Finally, on December 4, vandals attacked a proposed mosque site in Sydney, targeting the electrical system and causing an estimated $50,000 worth of damage. Anti-Muslim groups had previously targeted this proposed mosque site, covering it with anti-Islam stickers and vandalizing the building several times since the project was announced in July.

According to the Newcastle Muslim Association spokeswoman, there has been a heightened level of verbal abuse towards Muslims in the past months. A police official confirmed that they were investigating these strings of vandalism, but also online racist activity. Muslim leaders have claimed that since the new, intensified security laws were introduced, there has been an increase in attacks against Muslims. They report that in December alone there have been between 5 and 7 attacks per day against Muslims in Sydney.

With this level of anti-Islamic sentiment already existing in Australia, the Muslim community has announced that they believe the hostage-taking at Martin Place in Sydney on December 15 will serve to further intensify the strong anti-Islamic feelings. Prominent Muslim community leaders have begun bracing for a backlash against the Muslim community, warning Muslims to head straight home after work, school, and prayers. In one response to the siege, a group of anti-Islamic nationalists briefly gathered in front of the Martin Place Memorial before being removed after a minor altercation. According to the Party for Freedom chair, Nick Folkes, the protesters were "calling on the government to end multiculturalism, and end Muslim immigration". Folkes claimed that the party was not racist, but with to build a

"patriotic Australian political party". They also plan on carrying out further protests in areas where councils are considering building mosques.

Sydney police have also confirmed the surge in anti-Muslim sentiment and announced that they have been responding to an increased number of hate crimes aimed at the Muslim community since the siege. On December 16, at least one man was charged with making a threatening phone call to a mosque in Auburn. According to the Australian Muslim Women's Association president, there has been an increase of hate messages posted on social media and have been mailed to various Muslim organizations around Australia.

As Islamic terrorist attacks become more widespread and effects of Islamic radicalization can be publicly seen, it is likely that the authorities and general population will continue their hard-line behavior towards the radical community. The increasing Islamophobia among many Australian citizens is also likely to further divide the country along racial and religious lines.