

Counterterrorism action: Bankstown, 12 October 2016

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WHAT

On the afternoon of 12 October 2016, NSW Police arrested two 16-year old males near the Adnum Lane mosque in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown and charged them with acts in preparation to commit a terrorist act and with having membership of a terrorist organisation. Police allege the two, one from Parramatta and the other from Revesby in Sydney, had pledged allegiance to the so-called Islamic State (IS).

CT authorities had been monitoring the two for some time but effected the arrests in order to pre-empt what they considered to be an imminent attack. That morning, the boys had purchased two bayonet-style knives; following the arrest, they were found to have written notes pledging allegiance to IS.



Photo of police at the crime scene where two men were arrested at Adnum Lane, Bankstown in Sydney on 12 October 2016. (Photo by Christopher Pearce/Fairfax Media)

SO WHAT?

This is the eleventh time in two years that Australian authorities have disrupted an imminent terrorist attack; all but one of those cases have been associated with IS. This CT action demonstrates effective intelligence sharing and cooperation between law enforcement and intelligence agencies, particularly the important role of the Joint Counter-Terrorism Team (JCTT), and the ability of authorities to act quickly when needed.

Homegrown terrorist network. Both of those arrested have links to known Australian Islamist extremists. Extremist preacher Junaid Thorne was reportedly in the vicinity of the arrest and came onto the street after the arrest asking for his 'brothers'. Thorne served a short sentence in 2015 for attempting to evade CT authorities by using a false name to travel from Perth to Sydney, and his brother Shayden is currently facing terrorism charges of seeking to be a foreign fighter.

One of the accused is related to Hamdi al-Qudsi, who was recently convicted of recruiting and facilitating the travel of seven young Australians to Syria to fight for IS. Police allege that the accused participated as a 12-year-old in a 2012 Hyde Park protest led by al-Qudsi against the Operation Pendennis raids, holding a sign saying 'Behead all those who insult the prophet'. His home was one of those raided as part of Operation Appleby in September 2014.

One of the accused has social media links to extremist Wissam Haddad.

While the Australian Islamist extremist group is relatively small, the links in this case indicate that the network associated with al-Qudsi continues its allegiance to violent Islamist extremism and its intent to commit terrorist attacks.

CT information sharing. The two were known to CT authorities and had been under surveillance. One had been reported to police for refusing to stand for the national anthem at East Hills High School (where both went to school). When questioned about the incident, he said that he stood only for God and stated his opposition to Australian troops serving in the Middle East. This individual was recorded in a telephone conversation by CT authorities the day after NSW police employee Curtis Cheng was murdered, referring to the murder and stating he would attack police and do 'something to them that they have never seen before'.

The other accused was reportedly recently deported from Egypt after allegedly attempting to enter Syria to join IS as a fighter. On his return to Australia, he was found to possess electronic documents produced by IS.

Sharing and linking this information between agencies, particularly through the JCTT, was critical to identifying the potential threat and managing the investigation, and appears to have worked well.

Youth. One of the accused is related to a convicted terrorist and appears to have been influenced by radical Islamists since he was a young child. The other youth reportedly did not come from an extremist family background, but went to school with his co-accused. This highlights the ongoing trend of youth radicalisation and involvement in terrorism attacks, evidenced in the Endeavour Hills and Parramatta attacks, which also featured teenagers, and the high proportion of youths represented in Australia's foreign fighter cohort.

Weapons. The pair bought two bayonet-style knives from a local firearms store. Australia's strong firearms regulations mean that purchasing a firearm from the store wouldn't have been an option for them. The choice of a knife as a weapon is consistent with the recent Minto attack and the 2014 Endeavour Hills attack, and follows IS calls for jihadists to use whatever weapons are available.

Response. The decision to disrupt was made within minutes of the weapons being purchased, and the disruption occurred soon after. The speed of the response relied upon real-time surveillance and close communication with local Bankstown police, through the JCTTs, and led to a successful CT action, averting a likely attack. The success of this action was due to the individuals being known to authorities and under investigation, including active monitoring, as well as the proximity of local general duties police to effect the disruption.

NOW WHAT?

Homegrown terrorist network. Australian CT agencies should continue monitoring and, where possible, disrupting networks associated with known terrorists such as Hamdi al-Qudsi. This may require increased resources to monitor the homegrown terrorist network and its interaction with Australian foreign fighters and other IS affiliates. The high number of CT investigations in NSW, including returning foreign fighters, means that the high level of surveillance seen in this case will not be possible for all known terrorist associates.

CT information sharing. This incident demonstrated effective collaboration between CT agencies and the maturity of the JCTT construct in NSW. It isn't clear how well this might work in jurisdictions other than NSW and Victoria, where the JCTTs have experienced relatively less operational activity to date. For this reason, it's particularly important to share lessons learned from this event with other jurisdictions.

Youth. This plot further demonstrates the need to continue to focus on youth across the full range of CT responses, from countering violent extremism to legal and policing intervention. This needs to be managed appropriately due to the youth of the individuals, while balanced with the need to protect the public from terrorist acts. The proposal to amend control order legislation to apply to 14–16-year-olds, for example, was drafted to urgently address existing cases involving under-16 youths, such as in this case, but is still awaiting passage more than a year after it was first put to parliament.

Weapons. Australian states and territories have varying approaches to regulating the sale of knives to minors, developed in response to the use of knives in other crimes. While it would be useful to undertake a national review of access to purchasing knives, that should be done in concert with broader reviews of weapons access affecting various crime types. Of interest in this case is that the knives were purchased in a firearms store, where retailers have existing responsibilities for enforcing access to various regulated items. This case should be discussed with industry and business representatives to alert them to be aware of suspicious behaviour, and how and where to report any concerns.

Response. NSW and other jurisdictions should consider how they might manage an intervention response in a more remote environment, such as a non-metropolitan area. They should also exercise multijurisdictional scenarios in which another police force might be best placed to respond. Regular rehearsals to test response and command, control and communications capabilities between JCTTs and local law enforcement agencies should be conducted within and across all jurisdictions. The Australian public should also be advised that, due to the short timeframes involved, not all such attacks can be disrupted.

CONCLUSION

The Bankstown CT arrests provide reassurance that the NSW JCTT is working well, supported by the various CT agencies, both in information sharing and in the ability to respond quickly and decisively. This plot demonstrates, however, that an individual with intent can source the necessary tools to conduct a terrorist attack, and shows once again that low-level attacks remain a real threat to Australia. The timeframe involved demonstrates that intent can quickly translate into attack, and has tested Australia's response capabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Engage with firearms and military knife retailers** to raise awareness about the use of knives in terrorism, as well as other crimes, what to look for and how to report any concerns.
- 2. Consider options to quickly implement CT legislative amendments to current legislation** when there is a need to modify practices to address real and emerging threats.
- 3. Incorporate non-metropolitan and multijurisdictional responses** into CT scenarios and exercises.

About the authors

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