

## **“OPERATION APPLEBY” HIGHLIGHTS LOOMING TERRORIST THREAT IN LINE WITH ISLAMIC STATE’S PROGRESSION IN IRAQ**

*By André Burstin*

On Thursday September the 18th, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced that police had detained 15 suspected members of a support network of the Islamic State (IS) terror group, in a major counterterrorism operation carried out early in the morning in Sydney and Brisbane. Operation “Appleby”, which involved more than 800 police officers and members of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), is the biggest raid conducted against suspected terrorists in the country since “Operation Pendennis” in November 2005.

According to Attorney-General George Brandis, this particular investigation started in May. The decision to act however came only last night, after intelligence briefing based on intercepted phone calls showed that terrorists had planned to conduct “demonstration killings” in Australian cities, including random public beheadings.

Prime Minister Abbott later confirmed that Mohammad Baryalei, who has been labelled as the “most senior” Australian member of IS, had issued “quite direct exhortations” to commit such attacks, directly modelled on the situation in Iraq and Syria. According to police sources, what appeared to be a sword was also discovered during a raid conducted in the house of 22-year old Omarjan Azari in the suburb of Sidney. Considering the gravity of this plot, Tony Abbott solemnly declared war on the “Islamic Death Cult”.

Operation “Appleby” was indeed ordered while a series of incidents recently demonstrated the level of the terrorist threat upon Australia:

- On Friday September 12, the ASIO decided to raise the National Terrorism Public Alert level from “Medium” to “High”. Prime ministers’ office had then indicated that this advice was not based on specific intelligence of a particular

plot, but only on converging elements pointing out increased risk of terrorist attacks.

- On Wednesday September 10, two men had already been arrested in the greater area of Brisbane, following a 12-month terror investigation on suspicion of recruiting candidates for Jihad in Syria. One of the two suspects, identified as 31-year-old book-store owner Omar Succarieh, is the brother of Ahmed Succarieh, the first Australian suicide bomber in Syria.
- On Wednesday August 27, the Prime Minister told Parliament that a “person of interest” had been arrested a week earlier, as he was presumably about to leave the country to join Jihad. To recall, new counter-terrorism units have been created to monitor Sydney and Melbourne’s airports, as between 60 and 70 Australian nationals are believed to be fighting in the ranks of terrorist groups in Syria or Iraq.
- Lastly, it is worth mentioning that Sydney-based jihadist Mohamed Elomar has offered a reward to get information on local Muslim community leader Jamal Rifi.

The latter had publicly condemned terrorist Khaled Sharrouf, who has posted on social media pictures showing his 7-year-old son holding up a man's severed head. To recall, he is the nephew of Sydney’s “terrorist puppet master” Mohamed Ali Elomar, arrested during “Operation Pendennis” and later sentenced to 21 years in jail. Khaled Sharrouf, who was condemned to 5 years, was released from prison in 2009.

As we can see from these facts, Australia can be considered as one of the main targets of the Islamic State terrorist group outside its prime spheres of action in Iraq and Syria.

We must remind that the country has been at the forefront of the global war on terror since the immediate aftermath of September 9/11 terrorist attacks.

As soon as November 3, 2001, Al Jazeera indeed broadcasted a video statement showing Osama bin Laden identifying Australia as an “enemy of Islam”, mainly because of its involvement in the separation of East Timor from Indonesia. The country has also been particularly exposed to terrorist risk due to its specific geopolitical position in the Asia-Pacific region, as have shown, amongst others, the Bali attacks on October 12 2002, in which 89 Australian citizens lost their lives, and the bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta in September 2004.

Moreover, the decision of then Prime Minister John Howard to join the US-led “Coalition of the Willing” in Iraq has raised the country’s profile as a potential target.

Hence, Australian authorities put particular focus on strengthening their intelligence capacities, which enabled security services to foil several plots prepared by home-grown terrorists in the past years.

As mentioned above, the most important anti-terror action undertaken until now in the country's history was "Operation Pendennis" in November 2005. In August 2009, security services also launched "Operation Neath" to prevent a Melbourne-based cell linked to the Somali terrorist organisation Al-Shabaab from perpetrating an attack against Holsworthy Army Barracks in Sydney.

Despite these efforts, last days' events have highlighted the deep rootedness of the Australian radical Islamist networks, as well as their strong resilience capacities. It is indeed striking that individuals already involved in terrorist activities in the years 2000 still appear to be driving forces of the jihadist recruitment for Syria and Iraq.

Moreover, the nature of the latest foiled plot shows that these networks are not only prepared and willing to import Middle-eastern conflicts in their home-country, but also to transplant their more extreme and barbaric characteristics. One may in fact speculate that terrorists have speed up their plans as a response to Tony Abbot commitment to help Australia's partner to save the Yazidi Iraqi minority from IS ethnic cleansing campaign.

For all these reasons, one cannot rule out that the cells unearthed during "Operation Appleby" are only the tip of the iceberg.

In this particular context, more police actions must be expected in the coming weeks, especially as the Parliament is due to pass a new anti-terror legislation as soon as next week, with the risk of raising internal community tensions in Australia. Legal Muslim organisations such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir have indeed organized a demonstration in front of Sidney's Lakemba Rail Way Station to denounce the way the police raids took place.

In view of the urgency of the situation, it seems however more vital than ever to redouble intelligence and security's efforts, in order to avoid a major terrorist attack on the Australian soil.

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