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Countering Violent Extremism in Australia: Is State Control Effective?

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Synopsis

The Australian government's exclusive direction of interventions aimed at countering violent extremism within its communities poses challenges for the effectiveness of these initiatives. Involving community organisations is essential.

Commentary

A SURPRISING number of Australians have travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight with Islamic State and other extremist groups. Proportionate to population size, Australian foreign fighter departures equal that of France and amount to one more per thousand citizens than the United Kingdom. Over 120 individuals are thought to have made the trip, 340 have been stopped at airports, and a further 116 passports have been cancelled. Three 'lone wolf' terrorist attacks have shocked the nation in the past 15 months, and the national intelligence agency is currently investigating at least 400 suspected extremists.

The Australian Federal Government has responded resolutely with new legislation expanding the powers of security services, while 'softer' initiatives aimed at countering violent extremism (CVE) have also been attempted. How has the government's CVE project fared and what challenges does it face?

Experimental beginnings

The prevention of violent extremism in Australia falls under the auspices of the Attorney-General's Department, which established a CVE Unit in 2010 to identify and divert at-risk individuals, challenge ideologies, and to strengthen community cohesion. The unit introduced a Building Community Resilience Grants Programme

in 2011 to fund grassroots projects that support vulnerable youth and build capacity within communities to discourage extremism. Around A$5.3 million was awarded to 59 initiatives until the fund's cessation in 2013.

In 2014, the Abbott Government rolled out an updated version of the CVE project, which addressed the problem of Australians seeking to travel abroad to fight with extremist groups and focused more on countering ideology with individually targeted interventions. A new outlet for funding was branded the *Living Safe Together Grants Programme* and one-time allotments of $10,000-50,000 have been provided to community organisations that met the government's criteria.

Pathway to CVE intervention

The most significant variation from the previous government's scheme was the addition of a *Directory of CVE Intervention Services*. The idea was to create a directory of relevant organisations that authorities could call upon to assist individuals who had been assessed by a panel and deemed vulnerable to involvement in extremist activities. In order to register with the directory (and therefore gain access to the people they seek to help) an organisation is required to "clearly demonstrate that [its] services will assist to divert and disengage individuals from ideologies of violence and hate".

Individuals considered for CVE interventions are identified either by security agencies or members of the public who have called a designated national security hotline. Once identified, a specialised 'diversion' team within the Australian Federal Police ensures that the individual in question is not part of an active investigation which may conflict with a proposed CVE intervention. The individual is then assessed by a panel to determine his or her needs and relevant services from the directory are recommended. Participation then depends on the individual's willingness to volunteer.

Challenges to state-led CVE

The panel tasked with assessing the risk and needs of each individual is comprised exclusively of law enforcement officials, which is deemed necessary due to the sensitive nature of the information required for assessment. Psychologists and community leaders are supposedly consulted but are not directly part of the evaluation process. This means that those most qualified to appraise the nature of an individual's situation are excluded from making professional and/or culturally informed observations.

An all-police assessment panel will struggle to provide the kind of language and environment conducive to encouraging an individual to engage with CVE service providers. People tempted toward extremism are by definition anti-establishment in sentiment, and are therefore unlikely to pursue proposals made by state security agencies. Confronted with the suggestion of police-directed CVE interventions, individuals may perceive programmes offering mentoring or similar assistance as intelligence gathering exercises, aimed at gleaning information for future prosecution.

Community organisations that work on countering extremism have also been sceptical of the government's intentions and have questioned the utility of the state maintaining control of CVE interventions. Relations have been further strained by recent anti-terrorism police raids, and in July 2015 the Australian Federal Police was forced to cancel a dinner to celebrate Eid al-Fitr following a petition circulated among Muslim communities to boycott such occasions.

This trust deficit has purportedly resulted in very few (if any) community organisations actually signing on to the directory of services, which does not disclose names to avoid discrediting them. There is currently no avenue for community groups to deal with an individual they feel may be at risk without involving law enforcement.

Product of the environment?

Another issue concerns funding: a maximum one-time grant of $50,000 for a community-based project is not a great deal of money when considering payment of staff and the rental of suitable spaces in which to operate. In August 2014, the Abbott Government announced it was setting aside $13.4 million (of a $630-million counterterrorism package) for community programmes, yet so far only $1.8 million has been provided to organisations that meet the government's criteria.

Australia's 2015 Counter-Terrorism Strategy states that protecting lives is the government's "absolute priority". This is reflected in the strengthening of legislation, such as lowering the threshold for obtaining control orders and broadening surveillance powers. Managing the risk of terrorism in Australia has been informed almost exclusively by a security framework, which is clearly appropriate for disrupting an impending attack, but not so expedient for addressing the long-term threat of violent extremism.

CVE initiatives in Australia are unlikely to succeed if law enforcement maintains its heavy hand in proceedings. Police have a role to play but are not a suitable institution to be taking the lead. A challenge within the current context will be to find ways of involving relevant professionals in the initial engagement and assessment of individuals without compromising confidential information. This has been achieved in European countries such as Denmark, where inter-disciplinary assessment panels are the norm for CVE interventions.

Building trust within communities is also essential. Instead of organising dinners and consultations, perhaps it would be better to place more faith in grass-roots organisations and open up less threatening channels than the national security hotline to connect vulnerable youth with those qualified to manage their direction.

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