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Australian Government  
Australian Security  
Intelligence Organisation

# ASIO submission to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee

Inquiry into right wing extremist movements in Australia

Ref no. PCS 2024-04



*Remembering the past, securing the future*

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## ASIO's role

- ASIO protects Australia and Australians from threats to their security.
- ASIO's functions are set out in section 17 of the *Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Act 1979* (ASIO Act). 'Security' is defined in section 4 of the ASIO Act as the protection of Australia and its people from:
  - espionage;
  - sabotage;
  - politically motivated violence;
  - promotion of communal violence;
  - attacks on Australia's defence systems; or
  - acts of foreign interference;
 whether directed from, or committed within, Australia or not; and
  - the protection of Australia's territorial and border integrity from serious threats.
- The definition of security also extends to the carrying out of Australia's responsibilities to any foreign country in relation to matters noted above.
- In line with ASIO's functions, ASIO achieves its purpose by obtaining, correlating, evaluating and communicating intelligence relevant to security.
- This enables ASIO to investigate extremist threats, especially where the use of violence is proposed, and endeavours to disrupt threats before an act of violence occurs.
- ASIO and partner agencies in Australia and globally continue to grapple with the challenges associated with extremist threats online, including violent extremists' use of online platforms with end-to-end encryption.

## Changing definitions

- The security environment is complex, challenging and changing. Threats are increasingly intersecting, emerging from new places and blurring traditional distinctions.
- To more accurately reflect the nature of the threat, ASIO moved away from using the terms right-wing extremism and left-wing extremism in 2021, and instead refers to two categories of PMV:
  - Religiously motivated violent extremism (RMVE), and
  - Ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE).
- Not every ideologically motivated extremist is automatically a left-wing or right-wing extremist. There is a cohort of individuals motivated by a hybrid of conspiracies, grievances and anti-authority beliefs. It is neither helpful nor accurate to assign these individuals a place on the political spectrum.

## Terrorism environment

- ASIO lowered the National Terrorism Threat Level to POSSIBLE in November 2022.
- Despite this change, the threat from terrorism is not extinguished. Terrorists will continue to seek to generate fear in the community and promote their cause.
- There is a realistic possibility of a terrorist attack or attack planning in Australia within the next 12 months. ASIO's biggest concern is lone actors — an individual or small group not on the radar of law enforcement and security agencies — who could move to violence without warning.



## Ideologically motivated violent extremists

- IMVE—particularly nationalist and racist violent extremism — remains a threat and its adherents will continue to engage in offensive behaviours. IMVE views persist, and adherents are weaving new issues into their conspiracy theories and anti-establishment views.
- Consistent with our assessment of the Australian terrorism threat environment, ASIO's biggest IMVE-related concern is the threat from lone actors who could move to violence without warning.
- IMVE accounts for 25% of our priority counter-terrorism caseload.
  - While we remain concerned about IMVE, we assess the vast majority of established nationalist and racist groups are more likely to focus on recruitment and radicalisation rather than attack planning in the foreseeable future.
- Internationally, the March 2019 Christchurch attacks have been cited as inspiration for nationalist and racist violent extremist (NRVE) attacks overseas, and the attacks continue to resonate with NRVEs here in Australia.
- Over the last 18 months, we have seen an uptick in the number of NRVEs advocating sabotage in private conversations both here and overseas. It is particularly pronounced among NRVE 'accelerationists' — meaning extremists who want to trigger a so called 'race war'.

## Challenges in the online environment

- Online platforms remain significant enablers of radicalisation, the spread of propaganda, and other violent extremist activity.
- The use of online forums and spaces by NRVEs allows for rapid and easy connections between individuals globally.
- Violent extremist propaganda, whether through targeted narratives or ad hoc rhetoric, can be widely shared online to aid recruitment, radicalise and inspire new adherents or reinforce existing beliefs.
  - Some propaganda, such as detailed instructions for committing violence, can build violent extremists' capability.
  - The reach of extremist content online means individuals are radicalising very quickly — in days and weeks.
  - It remains concerning that a small number of minors continue to be attracted to violent extremist propaganda and ideologies, with most of the radicalisation of minors occurring online.
- The threat from NRVEs grew initially in the wake of the Christchurch attack and was also fueled by the rise in online activity as a result of the pandemic.
- ASIO has seen an exponential uptake of encrypted and secure communication platforms by violent extremists. Individuals of security concern are routinely using secure messaging apps, virtual private networks and fake emails to avoid detection.
  - End-to-end encryption damages intelligence coverage in many priority counter-terrorism cases.

## Weapons and tactics

- An attack is likely to be low-cost, using readily available weapons, and simple tactics. Weapons such as knives, vehicles, explosives, and firearms, used in a combination with simple tactics, can maximise casualties.
- The most likely location for a terrorist attack in Australia is a crowded place in a major city. Crowded places include shopping centres, transport hubs or other easily accessible locations. In some cases, the terrorist's

ideology or grievance may lead the attacker to choose a symbolic location such as a government building or place of worship.

- We have seen NRVE ‘accelerationists’ endorsing attacks against critical infrastructure, such as power grid, electrical substations and railway networks.

### An evolving threat environment

- The changing nature of terrorism is shaped by global events, emerging technologies, and broader social trends that include online radicalisation and the growth of extreme views, conspiracies and grievances.
- ASIO will continue to monitor developments in the threat environment and will respond appropriately to protect Australia and Australians from threats to security.