



Mr David Irvine, AO
Director-General, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation

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May I thank the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies here at the University of Melbourne for inviting me to address this very important forum. It is an honour and a privilege to be able to talk to you today. ASIO and the Australian Government value the opportunity to continue our engagement with leaders of Australia's Muslim communities and to build on our productive and collaborative – and I emphasise the word collaborative – relationship.

ASIO is an organisation that's existed for more than 60 years. In that time our mission and responsibilities have on occasion been the subject of controversy, misunderstanding and misinformation. ASIO has also been the subject of some suspicion, and this probably should not surprise us. A very wise and senior member of the Australian Muslim community once said to me, "David, I know that a national security intelligence organisation like ASIO must necessarily conduct most of its activities in secret, but a lot of people from my community have arrived in Australia from countries which do not operate under the same principles of democracy, the rule of law and effective civil libertarian and humanitarian cultures". He said, "You've got to understand that within our community, there will always be, as a result of our particular experiences, some suspicion of an organisation like ASIO".

I accept that and I understand that. I see my task as being to explain what ASIO does, what sort of threats we are required to deal with, and what we do to address those threats. I want to also impress upon you, that our obligation is to uphold Australian law, as well as Australian values, civil liberties and human rights. Finally, I am here to explain to you why I believe you should trust and have confidence in ASIO.

So what is ASIO's role?

Firstly, it is important to understand that ASIO is governed by the rule of law; the *ASIO Act 1979* sets out, very specifically, the types of security threats with which ASIO must deal. Our task is to collect and analyse intelligence to enable the Government to protect national security and the lives and wellbeing of Australians. Protecting the lives and wellbeing of Australians includes the lives and wellbeing of all members of Australia's Muslim communities.

In other words, ASIO exists to protect our Muslim communities against threats of violence just as much as it exists to protect other religious, social or ethnic communities within Australia.

Something that needn't concern us too much here today, but which actually occupies a lot of ASIO's time, is protecting Australia against espionage and sabotage. It is as important for ASIO today as it was 60 years ago. But since the late 1990s in particular, the biggest part of ASIO's activities has focussed on the collection and assessment of intelligence to help protect Australians against – what we call – “politically motivated violence”, which includes threats right across the spectrum, including from violent racist extremists, the likes of which include Anders Breivik, who killed a great number of innocent people in Norway in July of 2011.

But, we all have to realise and be very realistic in recognising that, over the past ten years, the principal source of terrorist attacks around the world has been from persons motivated by what my Muslim friends tell me is a critical misunderstanding or distortion of Islam. Our job is to protect against people who see it as part of their religious obligation to carry out violence against the perceived enemies of Islam.

In saying that, I want to make it absolutely clear that ASIO understands the vast difference between Muslim or Islamic beliefs – the core social and religious values of Islam – and the quite separate issue of violent extremist ideology and terrorism. We must also remember that the number of Muslims in Australia who espouse the extremist ideology of terrorist violence is an infinitely small part of the Muslim population. These people clearly do not represent the values and beliefs of the overwhelming majority of Australian Muslims. We should always remember that when we talk about the threat of terrorism in Australia.

But we should also remember that it only takes a very small number of people or even one person acting alone to perpetrate a terrorist incident in which many innocent people can be killed and many more injured or maimed for life. The very high profile attack in April at the Boston marathon is an example of the damage a very small number of people can do. Not long after that we were all equally appalled at the murder of a young British soldier, Lee Rigby, in Woolwich London, again involving only two actual attackers.

On a pro-rata basis since 9/11, Australia has lost more people to terrorist attacks than just about anyone else, primarily because of the Bali bombing in 2002. That incident still strikes deep in the memory of all Australians. We have been very fortunate not to have had a terrorist attack on Australian soil in that time. Because of that some people inevitably ask, “Well, if we haven't had an attack, why are you worried?” My response is that in the past ten years we have actually prevented at least four terrorist attacks in Australia that aimed to produce mass casualties amongst our civilian or uniform population. At this very moment ASIO is conducting almost 200 investigations related to possible terrorism here in Australia. There continues to be people within our midst, albeit in small numbers, who are talking the language of terrorist violence, and who see it as their duty to carry out such attacks.

Usually they are having these secret discussions away from the mosque and the community. ASIO has seen secret attempts to recruit young Australian Muslims to the violent extremist cause; we have seen secret planning for violence to take place. And the disturbing fact is, while these people derive inspiration and sometimes training from overseas ideologues and extremist religious thinkers, the great majority of the 23 people who have been convicted of terrorist offences here in Australia were either born in Australia or came here at a very young age. In that sense, we are talking about a home grown Australian problem as much as an imported problem. So, there is a threat; we believe it is persistent, and we are still in a

situation where a terrorist attack could occur in Australia. It's a threat against which we must remain active and vigilant.

What is ASIO's response to that type of threat?

Our job is to use intelligence to enable the prevention of a terrorist attack. Our job is prevention; a very different exercise, in some ways, from the traditional police function that focuses on the collection of evidence in order to prosecute and punish people who have committed crimes, including terrorist acts. That traditional form of police work is concerned with a historical event having taken place. ASIO works very closely with state and federal police and we are concerned first and foremost with detecting and preventing an event taking place.

In talking about prevention, a key philosophy that we follow in Australia is to try to prevent a terrorist incident occurring as early as possible, before it grows into a problem we can't control and represents a really serious and imminent threat to the lives of our fellow citizens.

Now sometimes, we can do that – nipping things in the bud, as it were – with just a quiet word to a person who is showing signs of leading down the path of violence. Sometimes, all that is required is a word to the person from an understanding religious leader or even the person's parents – people who can intervene in a culturally and religiously appropriate way. At other times, of course, more forceful action is needed to protect our community, particularly, where the advocate of terrorist violence commits a criminal act by actively planning or preparing for violence. And of course, preventative action may well involve a prosecution leading to jail sentences, an outcome we have seen several times now in Australia.

Because there is a lot of misunderstanding about ASIO, I want to talk briefly about our methods of operation. In the counter terrorism area, I liken ASIO's role to the anti-virus protection that you all should have on your computers. Like your anti-virus programs, ASIO's job is to work quietly in the background, looking for signs of concern or danger. Where we find something suspicious, we quietly investigate. If after taking a look we find nothing, we're very happy and we move on, just like your anti-virus program. If we find something that could potentially threaten Australia and the lives and safety of Australians, we advise the Government. What this means is that we collect and assess intelligence that will forewarn and enable Australia to take pre-emptive, preventative action against planned acts of terrorist violence.

We collect that intelligence by a number of means. You have all seen movies or television shows about how spies operate – but it's actually never quite as dramatic as that. However, because people who present a terrorist threat keep their activities secret, so must ASIO sometimes use secret methods to collect intelligence. We can legally intercept communications and we can legally conduct various forms of surveillance. However, our best successes come when we work with people in the community who see it as their civic duty to assist in the protection of that community.

This goes to a key message I would like to leave with you today. The work ASIO, as well as law enforcement, does to keep Australia safe, very much includes our valued Muslim

communities, who have helped make Australia the nation it is today. We are able to do this because most Australian Muslims understand that ASIO is not against Islam, we are against terrorism and other forms of violent extremism.

Why should communities trust ASIO when operating in secret means you cannot always know what we do? There are many elements that distinguish a security intelligence service like ASIO, in a democracy such as Australia, from the corrupt or brutal secret police found in less fortunate parts of the world. These elements give, I believe, good reason to trust ASIO, to have confidence in its impartiality, its legality and, if I can make this point as strongly as I can, in its essential humanity.

The first of these many elements is the law. ASIO's functions are very tightly prescribed by the law, as is the way we must go about those functions. The law – the *ASIO Act* – is available to everyone to read.

Secondly, ASIO is a fully accountable organisation, despite the fact we must from time-to-time operate in secret. It's important that national institutions in Australia, including the intelligence institutions, be properly accountable to the Parliament, and ultimately, to the people. So ASIO reports annually to Parliament and you can read our unclassified annual report on our website or you can request it from your local library. Our administration is examined at Senate hearings and we also appear before a special Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security. Moreover, everything we do as an intelligence organisation is monitored by an independent institution known as the Office of the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security. Everything we do is audited to ensure ASIO operates lawfully and with probity and appropriate propriety in all our activities. The Inspector-General can look at any file in the organisation to conduct her enquiries and she reports her findings to Parliament.

Thirdly, any ASIO assessment or action that is considered to be prejudicial to an Australian citizen can be subject to legal contestation or appeal, in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal or through the court systems. And at any given time, I am a respondent to any number of court actions. So, ASIO's assessments are contestable.

The next point is that ASIO is not a secret police; we are not an executive agency; we do not have powers of arrest or prosecution. That is a police function.

Fifthly, although ASIO has special, or what we call coercive powers, we can only use those powers when there is a good reason to do so. We are required to use those powers only in proportion to the seriousness or the immediate imminence of the threat, and when less intrusive powers would not be effective. A lot of the time we actually use very overt methods of investigation. We don't rush straight to our intrusive powers of interception when a quiet chat with a person over a cup of coffee will resolve matters in a far more direct way.

Most of our leads come from members of the public. It is because we receive information and assistance voluntarily from members of the public that we rarely if ever need to use coercive powers. Only when necessary and only when we've exhausted all other overt ways of resolving a matter do we resort to the sorts of covert things that you would expect a

security intelligence agency in a democracy like Australia to do. When we do exercise those powers, we do so with very strict oversight and accountability.

Australia has a security intelligence organisation to protect our security. But Australia also has a far more powerful institution that protects our society: the community itself. Our security can't be, in a democracy like Australia, something that comes down from governments alone. Governments need the active support and active involvement of the communities we are seeking to protect. We need ordinary Australians and community leaders to look out for and look after their friends and relatives. If they see or hear things that give them cause for concern, particularly if concerns relate to possible acts of violence or terrorism, community members should rightly talk to ASIO or the police.

I am aware that some people, including within our Muslim communities, say that no one should talk to ASIO, no matter the circumstances. This is an opinion that, in my view, risks adding to our shared problems. It is, after all, a very peculiar form of logic that suggests we protect ourselves and each other by *not* talking to each other. It also promotes an 'us versus them' attitude that focuses on the differences between Australians at the expense of the vast majority of things all Australians share in common. So, this '*don't talk to ASIO*' attitude is a view that I very, very, strongly reject. And, I hope it's a view that you would join me in rejecting.

There is a freedom to say no if one of my officers telephones or knocks on the door. Our people cannot ordinarily insist members of the public agree to meet with them. My point is: why should people say no, if they are able to provide help and assistance to protect the community? In many ways, I would regard it as a civic obligation to help. It doesn't mean they are betraying their community or their friends; it means that they are prepared to help protect them. ASIO can require people to talk to us but we've only exercised that power on very few occasions. So if someone comes to you and says, "ASIO's invited me for a cup of coffee," I would say, "Go ahead – and they'll probably pay for the coffee too."

Something people don't often realise is that when ASIO is out talking to people we're actually trying to get information that will assist in ruling out suspects. Many of our investigations reach a very happy conclusion. For example, we may find a situation where a person has shown signs of doing something untoward and then, after quiet investigation, we reach the conclusion that he or she is not involved in anything of security concern. For ASIO that is then the end of the matter.

So, a lot of our work is trying to separate fiction from fact. That's one of the key reasons why it is so important for us to be talking to the community. Collaboration with the community is absolutely critical in enabling us to do our job and I know the same applies to our law enforcement colleagues both state and federal.

I should now like to move to a slightly different subject. ASIO is not only concerned with threats to the lives of Australians at home or overseas, but we are also, under the *ASIO Act*, concerned with those matters which might endanger the various communities within our midst – not as individuals, but as communities, and which might endanger the very harmonious communal relations which form the bedrock of a successful country of immigration such as Australia.

Australia's very inclusive multicultural society is one of the strengths of our nation. We need to harness this strength in the face of the divisive narrative of terrorists and other groups, who seek to destroy communal harmony. The contribution various communities make to national security and to social harmony is of great importance. Over the past year in particular, we have been very grateful for the outstanding contribution Australia's Muslim leaders have made in promoting communal harmony. Everyone can understand that there can be tensions within elements of our community, particularly as a result of developments overseas. We all know there have been tensions in the past year, including some which have led to unlawful incidents here in Australia.

The leaders of Australia's Muslim communities have recently taken appropriate, visible and very effective measures to curtail some of the extremist messages designed to divide us and have presented strong and positive leadership in times of heightened tensions. The best example is the efforts last September by community leaders in the wake of worldwide attention to the contents of a film many Muslims found grossly offensive. The response of Muslim leaders to that particular incident was outstanding. In the violent protest that occurred in the centre of Sydney on that Saturday afternoon, we saw how quickly things could get out of hand. We were also very conscious that there could have been a violent racist or extreme right wing backlash. So it was hugely important that Australia's Muslim leaders played a role in restoring calm.

For your strong and positive leadership on that issue, you are rightly to be congratulated. I welcome your continued leadership and efforts to promote communal harmony and a better understanding of the compatibility between the values of mainstream Islam and those of multicultural democratic Australia.

A few cautions: for people in authority and influence, there are some very important considerations in what we should say to the public and the communities that look to us for advice. I have painted a picture today of a potentially serious threat to Australia from terrorism, and that threat is real. At the same time, we must be absolutely assiduous in emphasising publicly that the actions of a tiny minority in one particular ethnic or religious grouping within our multicultural Australia should not be seen as representative of the views and contributions of the vast majority of that grouping. We have hundreds of thousands of Muslim Australians; they are people who wish to practice their religion freely, in a stable, safe, democratic and religiously tolerant country. They are the people who are getting on with the business of being good Australians, building stable, safe, prosperous lives for themselves and their children, who are the future generation of Australians.

The second caution I have is that it is totally counterproductive for someone in my position, or governments generally, to overstate the case in relation to the terrorist threat. I've been honest in describing the terrorist threat today and, yes, we are right to be concerned about people talking about conducting terrorist attacks in Australia. We are right to be vigilant and alert to potential threats within our midst. There are people in this country, religious or political extremists, who believe it is their duty to undertake acts of violence in support of their own distorted ideologies. If we take no action to stop them, then our safety and our successful multicultural society may be put at risk. But at the same time, Australian citizens, including members of Australia's Muslim communities, should not be all consumed with fear of a terrorist threat. There is a real danger, when we talk about these issues, of what we call in English, 'crying wolf'. That is, of always saying there's going to be a problem, but the

problem never eventuates. That can result in your message being ignored. So, it is important that in working together, we don't overstate the problem, or for that matter exceed what is absolutely necessary in our intelligence collection activities.

Finally, I should like to raise the issue of Syria. The conflict in Syria is miles away but we all know that it is having an impact here in Australia. We all deplore the violence and the suffering that is occurring in Syria. We're seeing this brutal conflict played out on our television screens every night, and there is even more explicit footage, horrifying footage, if you watch the internet. As community leaders, I'm sure that many of you have been asked for advice as to what can be done to help the people of Syria.

The Australian Government has been quite clear in its view on the conflict. The Government remains committed to an international response on Syria that accords with international law. We also advise Australians not to travel to Syria at this time because the security situation is extremely dangerous and the Government's ability to provide consular assistance and support within Syria is really very limited. All Australians in Syria should depart immediately.

Australians should also be aware that it is illegal under Australian law for any person in Australia to provide support to any armed group in Syria. This includes fighting for either side, funding and training or recruiting someone to fight, or funding or supplying weapons for either side in Syria.

The Government is concerned for the safety of young Australians who travel to the conflict zone for whatever purpose. A number of Australians have already lost their lives in the conflict. No one wants to see this number increase. Rather than risking their lives or being drawn into activities that go beyond providing aid, the Government believes Australians should help the people of Syria through humanitarian assistance provided by United Nations agencies, or non-government organisations that don't support either party to the conflict.

There's another element to the Syrian issue that I feel I should raise with you as well. We do not wish to see the ongoing political and sectarian violence in Syria promote tensions between communities here in Australia, as happened in the early 1990s between the Balkan communities in Australia. Such tensions have already produced a small amount of localised violence and criminal activity in some of our major cities. Such actions are detrimental to the culturally diverse nature of Australian society, and in the case of violence against people and vandalism against businesses, that are also against the law. We must remember that many members of our communities have come to Australia specifically to escape violence and oppression overseas and they don't want to be involved in activities here in Australia which are going to impinge on their new rights and freedoms. So, Australians are encouraged to explore other ways in which they can help the people of Syria and the Attorney-General's Department has put out advice on that, which is available to you.

I should like to conclude by summarising the points I think are most important.

Yes, there is a persistent threat of terrorist violence in Australia, associated with a range of extremist and distorted political, religious, and racist ideologies.

No, I don't think we should exaggerate the threat or let paranoia dominate our daily lives.

Nevertheless, we should be alert and vigilant, as community leaders, to the potential for terrorism from a tiny minority of people in our midst.

Fighting terrorism and violence is not the responsibility of only one part of government; it is a community responsibility. Effective partnership between security agencies, law enforcement and the community is the Australian way of handling such threats. And so far, I think we've been doing pretty well.

The leaders of Australia's Muslim communities have played a crucial role in promoting community harmony in multicultural Australia as well as helping to protect Australians, including Australian Muslims, from the threat of terrorism. I know you will continue to play that role.

With regard to ASIO itself, you can be assured we operate in accordance with the rule of law and pay due attention to the rights of Australians. Our activities are legal and proportionate to the gravity of the threat we face.

Finally, can I say to you, as leaders in our community, that my organisation is deeply committed to working with you and your communities to ensure our country remains a safe and democratic one in which Muslim Australians along with other Australians can thrive and prosper.

Thank you very much.