

A New Mindset for Countering Transnational Terrorism

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How can law enforcement strengthen efforts to prevent terrorism? What is the responsibility of law enforcement agencies in countries where the threat of terrorism is low? What are the recommendations of emerging law enforcement leaders in relation to countering transnational terrorism?

Background

*'The South-East Asia region continues to face a clear and present danger from terrorism.'*¹

This paper is a reflection on the shared insights from the 48th Asia Region Law Enforcement Management Program (ARLEMP 48). ARLEMP 48 was conducted in Hanoi in April 2019 and attended by emerging law enforcement leaders from 16 countries spanning South Asia, South-East Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Australia.² The majority of the ARLEMP 48 participants were working in operational counter terrorism roles.

In recent years, ARLEMP alumni have identified the escalating priority of terrorism, violent extremism and foreign terrorist fighters in the region. In response, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in partnership with the Vietnam Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and RMIT University dedicated the 48th ARLEMP to the theme of Transnational Counter Terrorism.

Most ARLEMP 48 members joined the program with a strong awareness of the national profile of terrorism in their respective countries and a media-informed awareness of the global situation. It was impressive to observe the participants' mindset transformation as stereotypes were debunked and a more accurate and nuanced global terrorism landscape was explored. ARLEMP members actively welcomed the unique opportunity to engage with leading international academics and utilised the shared data and research to build a more comprehensive overview of the international terrorism situation.

Key Recommendations

ARLEMP 48 participants recognised that operational outcomes won't change unless we change our operational practice. Put simply, we will continue to get the same result, if we don't change our law

¹ Tan, A. T. H. (2019). Terrorism in Southeast Asia: a clear and present danger. In D. M. Jones, P. Schulte, C. Ungerer, & M. L. R. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of terrorism and counter terrorism post 9/11* (pp. 327-339). Edward Elgar Publishing.

² ARLEMP 48 included participants from the following countries: Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Vietnam.

enforcement approaches. Participants unanimously agreed that it's time to change our mindset in relation to how we understand terrorism, and this will, in turn, positively influence the way that we respond to the operational challenges of this ever-evolving crime type.

Adopt a New Mindset – Start by Redefining Transnational Terrorism

If our law enforcement agencies do not understand the scope of international terrorism and the motivations, methods and reach of terrorists, violent extremists and foreign terrorist fighters in our countries, how can we hope to effectively prevent and disrupt potential terror attacks?

Terrorism is not a 'Muslim Problem'

The first step in building a new mindset involves debunking the perception that extremist terrorist activities are exclusively a 'Muslim problem'. Ryacudu (2018) suggests that terrorist extremism in South-East Asia can be viewed in two separate categories: either Al-Qaeda-centric or IS-centric. This view was challenged at ARLEMP 48 as eminent guest speakers encouraged participants to think beyond stereotypical Muslim-centric depictions of terrorism and explore right-wing extremism and lone wolf terrorism. This was a significant wake-up call for many participants.

Bakali (2019) explains 'there is a common refrain in contemporary public, media, and political discourse on terrorism, which asserts that Muslim religious extremism is the greatest contributor to terrorism globally. When Muslims engage in 'lone wolf' acts of violence, there is widespread media coverage of the events. This is often not the case when non-Muslim perpetrators engage in similar acts.'³ ARLEMP 48 participants openly confessed that their perceptions of terrorism often result in a misguided belief that terrorism is exclusively intertwined with Islam.

'Terrorism is not as I expected. I had the picture of Islam and now I see much deeper than the stereotype in the media.' (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

Extremism is not solely based on purely religious or political motives. Extremism extends to the emergence of right-wing violent extremism focused on racial supremacy and toxic masculinity and can be considered the 'fifth wave'⁴ of modern terrorism. In 2020, the Director-General of Australia's Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), Mike Burgess, highlighted that 'more than a third of ASIO's terrorism investigations relate to right-wing extremism, up significantly since the Christchurch Mosque attacks in March 2019. With strongly visible nationalist extremist groups and movements globally, such as fascists, neo-Nazis and Covid-19 conspiracy theorists, there are increasing concerns about the potential threat of violence by individuals or groups inspired by them.'⁵ Terrorism threats are often not widely known or seen by the general public. High risk actors are hidden amongst the lawful existence of general communities. Modern policing efforts must look beyond Islamic stereotypes and target those who immerse themselves within society and remain hidden until 'it is time to strike'.

³ Bakali, N. (2019), 'Challenging Terrorism as a Form of "Otherness": Exploring the Parallels between Far-right and Muslim Religious Extremism', *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Fall 2019), pp. 99-115, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.13169/islstudj.5.1.0099.pdf> (Accessed 13 June 2021)

⁴ Auger, V. A. "Right-Wing Terror: A Fifth Global Wave?" *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2020, pp. 87–97. *JSTOR*, Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/26918302 (Accessed 9 July 2021).

⁵ Close, L. (23 October 2020), *Right-Wing Extremists 'Hiding In Plain Sight'*, *The Strategist*, The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Available at: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/right-wing-extremists-hiding-in-plain-sight/> (Accessed on 11 June 2021).

[Look Deeper at the Definition of Terrorism](#)

The Vietnamese participants at ARLEMP 48 shared a different perception of terrorism to other participants. While ARLEMP 48 was focused on transnational counter terrorism, Vietnamese participants were focused on national level political terrorism and shared examples of police station bombing incidents. Guest speakers and other participants encouraged the Vietnamese participants to expand their attention to transnational terrorism and the potential movement of returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) through Vietnam. Participants from Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR noted that they had not previously considered the risk of FTFs using their international borders as a transit point. Yet, as Close (2020) acknowledges: 'Covid-19 has reduced the ability of terrorists to travel globally and regionally but, despite IS's loss of territory in Iraq and Syria, about 18,000 foreign fighters remain in the region. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation has assessed that a high threat level is still posed within Australia and Southeast Asia by people continuing to support IS's cause.'⁶

No country is immune from terrorism. Gunaratna (2017), Head of Singapore's International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, suggested that the southern Philippines is emerging as a destination for FTFs from countries including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Yemen, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, noting that nationals of these countries were among those killed in the battles in Marawi in 2017.⁷ ARLEMP 48 participants acknowledged that FTFs travelling from these source countries are using South East Asian air, land and sea borders as transit points before reaching their destinations in Philippines or elsewhere.

Improve Transnational Police Collaboration

'One country cannot solve terrorism alone, so we need to work together and understand each other's cases, risks and actions.' (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

ARLEMP 48 participants were united in agreement that it 'takes a network to break a network'. In a policing context, the ability to cooperate is instrumental to countering the perils of terrorism. As the risk of terrorism escalates, police collaboration is increasingly critical. In the Australian context the operational tempo for terrorism investigations is at an unprecedented level. Current trend analysis indicates that not only has the overall number of individual targets increased, but these individuals are progressing along the radicalisation spectrum at a rapid speed. In early 2021, the *Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia* reported:

Over the past twelve months, overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic and related impacts, there have been multiple indications that changes in the landscape of violent extremism have accelerated.⁸

⁶ Close, L. (23 October 2020), *Right-Wing Extremists 'Hiding In Plain Sight'*, The Strategist, The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Available at: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/right-wing-extremists-hiding-in-plain-sight/> (Accessed on 11 June 2021).

⁷ Gunaratna, R. cited in: Westerman, A. (2017) *How Big a Threat Is Extremism in Southeast Asia?* Parallel, National Public Radio, Available at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/06/11/530949383/how-big-a-threat-is-extremism-in-southeast-asia> (Accessed on 13 June 2021)

⁸ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (February 2021) *Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia*, Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security.

The overwhelming majority of investigations include an international nexus, and collaboration between international law enforcement partners has never been greater. This collaboration leverages on strong partnerships, capabilities and capacities.

'I have learned and internalised that fighting terrorism cannot be done alone but rather, needs high levels of cooperation and collaboration. We must have a global and proactive approach.' (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

During ARLEMP 48, participants examined steps to strengthen law enforcement responses to transnational terrorism. Participants identified that they have previously lacked opportunities to connect with other countries, resulting in a largely insular and non-collaborative approach to a crime type that urgently requires transnational awareness and cooperation. Participants also recognised that high levels of political and community sensitivity present further challenges to collaboration.

'ARLEMP enables us to know how to build relationships and work, not just in a national framework, but also, at the international frontiers.' (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

Cooperation and intelligence sharing were agreed as critical steps in preventing and proactively addressing transnational terrorism.

'ARLEMP 48 was a career-changer for an officer like me. All of a sudden, I have become an international cop with police connections in a lot of countries. Now when I hear news about transnational terrorism, I first search out my brothers and sisters from partner countries, then we interact to share information and intelligence. My reach is now spread globally.' (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

'ARLEMP gave me cooperation with partner countries in a way that is improving the commitment for working together, intelligence sharing, live report sharing and operation in action. So far, I have gained very successful interaction and investigation outcomes.' (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

Strengthen Intelligence Sharing

Aden (2018) acknowledges that law enforcement institutions 'are built upon secrecy. Police agencies often keep knowledge about individual cases and their strategies secret as long as possible. Intelligence services build their work and strategies upon secrecy even more.'⁹ Aden explores how we promote intelligence sharing in a climate of transparency and accountability.

The ARLEMP 48 participants acknowledged the challenging semantics around 'intelligence'. In a number of participating countries, 'intelligence' is defined traditionally as 'state secrets'. Whereas 'intelligence' in a contemporary law enforcement context simply relates to the exchange of useful criminal information

⁹ Aden, H. (2018), 'Information Sharing, Secrecy and Trust Among Law Enforcement and Secret Service Institutions in The European Union', in *West European Politics*, Volume 41, 2018, Issue 4.

(in accordance with Standard Operating Procedures) to effectively intercept or disrupt transnational crime.

The unanimous view within the ARLEMP 48 group was that it's time to dismantle restrictive barriers relating to intelligence sharing. Indeed, the group highlighted that serious organised criminals rely on and benefit from the lack of sharing amongst police.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) describes criminal intelligence as:

*'... the lifeblood of the fight against transnational organised crime. It is the foundation for all proactive investigations and a cross-cutting issue since the same expertise and methodology is used for all serious crimes, including, corruption, drug trafficking, and terrorism. A fundamental component of building law enforcement capacity involves enhancing understanding of how criminal intelligence works and how practically to develop, share and use it.'*¹⁰

ARLEMP 48 participants acknowledged that the timely facilitation of intelligence products results in more effective operations. In simple terms, this requires permission and willingness to 'Dare to Share'. This is a shift from traditional practices of non-disclosure, but it is an essential step if we are to improve efforts to disrupt transnational crime.

Thao (2021) shares:

'Dare to share was an important lesson for all of us. After ARLEMP 48 we progressed the connections between the ARLEMP participants and speakers through social messaging applications (WhatsApp, Telegram, etc). This instant connection provides a valuable channel about individual cases. We are already using this for pre-emptive sharing to put the criminal jigsaw together before an attack. We also applied the Dare to Share approach when recent terrorist attacks occurred in Sri Lanka (April 2019), Philippines (August 2020), and Indonesia (March 2021). If we had waited for the old-fashioned transmission of paper documents, the perpetrators would have easily avoided detection. Instead, we responded quickly and shared insights from multiple countries which added significant inputs to the criminal intelligence picture. Suddenly, it was not just Sri Lanka or Indonesia or Philippines working alone. We had a critical channel for contributing to their intelligence map. Of course, messaging applications are not suitable for the transference of some information, but that's our next step. Now we are ready to share, we need to back this up with systems to effectively convey the intelligence information in a timely and secure manner. Let's keep talking about that.'

Other ARLEMP 48 participants report:

'Straight after ARLEMP 48 we experienced the Easter Sunday terrorists attack in Sri Lanka. Thanks to my ARLEMP 48 members as they shared a lot of information to me about the Thauheej Jamath group.'

'Immediately after the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka, we were able to provide rapid information to our ARLEMP brother in Colombo regarding the information we had.'

¹⁰ <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/law-enforcement.html>

Police often imagine they require ‘brand new’ solutions to address transnational crime. In ARLEMP 48, a resounding lesson highlighted the need to upgrade traditional police skills in the areas of intelligence sharing, proactive investigations, community engagement and collaboration. The final presentation by the ARLEMP 48 participants outlined their intention to focus on intelligence-led investigations and prevention. The Indonesian and UAE participants advised they already cooperated during ARLEMP 48 to share intelligence which progressed the investigation of a terror suspect. UAE noted that they would not previously have responded to such an inquiry and that ARLEMP provided the platform for trust and sharing.

During a subsequent ARLEMP in Hanoi in November 2019, the ARLEMP 50 members provided valuable insights into the changing organisational culture in terms of ‘intelligence’:

‘I realise intelligence is not spying or stealing valuable information, but it is sharing information to support investigators and law enforcement officers to crime prevention and combating. The trend of criminals nowadays is more transnational so criminal intelligence is an effective tool to quickly chase criminal movement across countries.’ (ARLEMP 50)

Adopt a Proactive Investigation Approach

The traditional investigation approach involves police action **after** a crime has been committed. In contrast, it is proposed that investigations are instituted **prior** to a terrorist attack. Proactive investigations rely on the appropriate allocation of resources for police to actively share intelligence on potential suspects prior to an offence being committed.

‘I completely changed my thinking. I always thought that we need to investigate after the crime (it’s the traditional way for my country. It’s a revelation to think how we can investigate before the crime to stop the terrorist attack (not just investigate after it happens). Now I need to change the way we teach students at our police academy.’ (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

‘Proactive investigations are more effective because the investigators control the investigation.’¹¹

Looking beyond traditional investigation strategies, a proactive approach to combatting established or future terrorism threats may lead to improved prevention of harm and protection of our communities. Whilst the importance of strong investigation and prosecution approaches cannot be understated, consideration of a broader spectrum of responses including disruption and diversion strategies can complement and enhance police prevention efforts in collaboration with community, national and international partners. Disruption strategies targeting travel and financial sources of terrorism will invariably include a transnational element requiring timely and close collaboration between affected law enforcement agencies. Appropriate criminal intelligence sharing is the key that enables proactive and effective prevention outcomes.

¹¹ https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Toolkit-files/08-58296_tool_5-2.pdf

In a similar vein, collaboration and sharing of intelligence trends and strategies relevant to effective diversion programs across international law enforcement agencies that focus on intervention, rehabilitation and reintegration can and do lead to outcomes that address the rising threat of individual radicalisation and community engagement to identify and report emerging threats.

Some participants acknowledged that they lack experience conducting investigations in the preventive and proactive space. Countries that have previously been considered as having a low-profile threat of terrorism (including Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, UAE, Nepal, Maldives, Hong Kong and Singapore) expressed their fear of being ill-prepared for potential attacks and movement of FTFs, and they actively utilised the opportunity to learn from guest presenters and build relationships with those countries with stronger expertise, including Indonesia, Philippines, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Australia.

'I went to other training programs for terrorism courses, but we concentrated on basic skills. ARLEMP prepared me to cooperate with other countries and how to take proactive steps and share information together so that we can prevent terrorism before it happens, and we now have the strong relationships here that will make it easier to collaborate, which we must do.' (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

'The most important outcome for us is the new proactive approach to terrorism. We have potentially intercepted and prevented attacks due to cooperation and information sharing with our Asian partners. Now I make sure we share information quickly to prevent disaster later.' (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

Many participants confirmed that their agencies tend to take a **reactive** approach to terrorism. Participants clearly changed their mindset during ARLEMP 48, and a **proactive**, intelligence-sharing approach was advocated by all participants in the Joint Action Plan. Participants shared examples of how this was practically adopted during their follow-up surveys:

'The most important outcome for us is the new proactive approach to terrorism. We have potentially intercepted and prevented attacks due to the cooperation and information sharing with our Asian partners. Now I make sure we share information quickly to prevent disaster later.' (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

'Straight after ARLEMP 48 we experienced the Easter Sunday terrorists attack in Sri Lanka. Thanks to my ARLEMP 48 members as they shared a lot of information with me about the Thauheej Jamath group.' (ARLEMP 48 Participant)

Adopting a proactive approach also demands that police advance their technological investigative capabilities. The hidden or camouflaged components of the internet, including the deep and dark webs, are common tools for the 'newer generation of terror'. These tools provide the opportunity to operate anonymously, influence others and obfuscate actual locations thereby providing a protective layer that is difficult to identify and penetrate unless police have comparable technological capacity.

Improve Community Engagement

ARLEMP members recognised that community members can play an important role in sharing information which can proactively counter terrorist attacks. There is always someone, somewhere who knows something or someone and this presents an opportunity that can deliver success. However, how can we expect the public to share this information when law enforcement doesn't provide accessible channels for engagement?

Police cannot act alone in any pursuit of justice, no matter the crime. The recognition that the community has a role in sharing terrorism-related information is a fundamental step in opening the door to useful raw intelligence. ARLEMP 48 participants agreed that investing time to build and broaden relationships with the community is important, but it requires a fundamental change in the policing approach by some agencies. In today's globalised policing world, it is essential that police identify, cultivate and most importantly nurture their own networks. Policing coalitions are not just insular amongst one another anymore. Police cooperation must include connections with government agencies, private sector companies, industry conglomerates, academia, media and the wider community. There is no limitation to the amount and level of relationships police can develop, join, coordinate and benefit from. ARLEMP 48 participants recognised that the criminal underworld can also provide vital information that benefits policing efforts.

How do we encourage community members to come forward? ARLEMP members proposed varying incentives including a guarantee of anonymity and financial inducements. However, participants agreed that the willingness of the community to provide police with particular insights is primarily realised when mutual trust and respect are present. Trust and respect are influenced by the community's perception and encounters with local police. The reputation of a police agency has a significant determining factor in the ability of police to identify, cultivate and most importantly nurture potential information providers or human sources.

Revise Training for Police Cadets

The version of terrorism we share with our police cadets influences our future ability to effectively counter terrorism. ARLEMP 48 members acknowledged that national police academies primarily give priority to crimes which fall within the national spotlight. This typically means drug trafficking, human trafficking, people trafficking, and cybercrime tend to attract more attention in countries where the terrorism threat is considered low. However, allowing terrorism to fall 'under the radar' on the premise of being a low threat presents an opportunity for organised criminals.

ARLEMP 48 participants shared that the risk of potential terrorist activity increases when law enforcement agencies are not well-equipped with knowledge or capacity to address terrorism. Participants particularly noted the travel patterns of returning FTFs and their pathways often via unexpected destinations, including Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia, to avoid attention or detection.

We make ourselves a target for potential terrorist activity if our training academies are not actively preparing the future generation of law enforcers to effectively target terrorism.

Conclusion

The threat of terrorism globally hasn't diminished and is likely heightened by Covid-19 and the increasing influence of online platforms.¹²

The ARLEMP 48 participants recognised **we can not effectively counter terrorism if we continue to narrowly define terrorism, work alone, hold onto intelligence, ignore community sources and operate in a reactive way.**

The reach of terrorism is worldwide. We all have an obligation to work together to disrupt transnational terrorism. It's time to change our mindset, our strategies and our operating procedures. This begins with practical steps that Vietnam and all law enforcement agencies can actively initiate, including:

- Redefining terrorism.
- Improving police collaboration.
- Sharing intelligence.
- Adopting a proactive approach.
- Engaging the community.
- Revising cadet training.

A new mindset is critical for keeping up, staying ahead and countering transnational terrorism. It starts with us.

What is ARLEMP?

The Asia Region Law Enforcement Management Program (ARLEMP) was established in 2005 with primary goal of enhancing law enforcement cooperation to combat transnational crime. ARLEMP is a partnership between the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the Vietnam Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and RMIT International University Vietnam.

What is the RMIT Transnational Security Centre?

RMIT's Transnational Security Centre (TSC) is a world-leading educational platform for emerging law enforcement leaders. Since 2005, RMIT's TSC has provided a platform for police, immigration, border control and customs officials to connect, collaborate and strengthen response to address transnational crime and the illicit movement of people and goods. In the past two decades, over 1500 officers from 38 countries have graduated from RMIT's TSC. Our programs provide a pivotal launching pad which expertly prepare leaders for the rigours and realities of managing decisions, resources, teams, partnerships and communication against a backdrop of a vastly complex era of crime and border movement.

¹² Close, L. (23 October 2020), *Right-Wing Extremists 'Hiding In Plain Sight'*, The Strategist, The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Available at: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/right-wing-extremists-hiding-in-plain-sight/> (Accessed on 11 June 2021).

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