

Terrorist attack in Minto, 10 September 2016

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WHAT

At around 4 pm on 10 September 2016, 22-year-old Australian national Ihsas Khan attacked Wayne Greenhalgh on Ohlfsen Street, Minto, in southwest Sydney. Khan stabbed Greenhalgh multiple times with a large knife, inflicting serious but not critical wounds to his hands and body, including puncturing his lung.

Khan and Greenhalgh were both on foot in the street when the attack occurred, reportedly without any engagement between them immediately prior. Reports indicate that they knew each other by sight, as both lived in the area.

Greenhalgh found refuge in a nearby home-based business, although Khan followed him and attempted, unsuccessfully, to force his way in. Three people on the street engaged with Khan and subdued him until police arrived. Khan was charged with attempted murder and committing a terrorist act.

The attacker was known to police for petty criminal offences in 2014, cutting down Australian flags in the same neighbourhood. Khan told police at the time that his actions were due to hating Australians because of the wars in



Deputy Commissioner Catherine Burn talks to media at a press conference in Sydney on 11 September 2016 about the Minto stabbing attack. (Journalist's photo) © Simone Ziaziaris/AAP.

Afghanistan and Iraq. He was initially charged with larceny and property damage, but the charges were dropped for mental health reasons. He wasn't known to authorities for links to terrorism or extremism before the stabbing attack.

Media reports indicate Khan lived with his mother until she died at the end of 2015, and had a history of mental health issues that weren't being managed, including depression since his mother's death. He was unemployed, having dropped out of university. NSW Police advise that Islamist extremist material was found at his house; media reports indicate this may have included Daesh's *Dabiq* magazine. Reports indicate Khan often demonstrated odd behaviour in his neighbourhood, including making apparently extremist statements, and may have been associating with individuals who support Islamist extremism. The police stated that they will allege Khan's attack was inspired by Daesh, and that the target was chosen because he 'represented Australia'.

SO WHAT?

The Minto attack was an unsophisticated terrorist attack using a knife to attack a member of the public. Daesh and other Islamist extremist groups have called for this type of low-level attack to instil fear. Such a low-cost and relatively simple attack could be replicated elsewhere with minimal resources. The attack ultimately failed, as the perpetrator succeeded only in wounding one person and was effectively countered by members of the public.

Strategic messaging. Announcing the attack and arrest, NSW Police Deputy Commissioner Catherine Burns stated that Khan held strong extremist views and was inspired by Daesh to commit the attack, which was deliberately planned. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull confirmed there was no need to change the terrorist threat alert level, and linked the attack to the ongoing terrorist threat since 9/11. While the Prime Minister's advice was a useful reminder of the basis for the threat alert level, in linking the attack to the ongoing terrorist threat since 9/11 his comments may inadvertently support Islamist messaging celebrating what was ultimately an unsuccessful attack. The Grand Mufti of Australia stated his 'unequivocal condemnation' of the attack, usefully addressing previous criticisms of how the Australian Muslim community responds to terrorism.

Response capability. Counterterrorism (CT) authorities didn't have specific warning indicators of this attack and were unable to prevent it. While Khan had reportedly demonstrated odd and menacing behaviour immediately before the attack, this wasn't reported. While the attack has been described by police as 'deliberate', it didn't demonstrate detailed planning that might have attracted their attention. Members of the public intervened during the incident to provide sanctuary to the victim and to confront then subdue the attacker. Local police officers responded quickly and effectively to apprehend the perpetrator. The NSW Joint Counter-Terrorism Team (JCTT), which is based in Sydney, was able to focus capabilities on the attack quickly.

Intelligence sharing. As Khan wasn't known to CT agencies, it doesn't appear that better information-sharing arrangements between these agencies might have disrupted the plot. The perpetrator's mental health appears to have been a factor in the attack. In July 2016, following the Nice attack, Prime Minister Turnbull announced a review of possible links between terror suspects' mental health and past criminal behaviour, including access to mental health records for CT purposes. This review is ongoing.

Terrorist strategy. This was the fourth terrorist attack in Australia in two years and the third in Sydney; the last was Curtis Cheng's murder in Parramatta in October 2015. As with the other attacks, the Minto incident appears to have been inspired by Daesh rather than directed by it. It indicates the ongoing intent of Islamist extremists to attack Australia where possible, and some support from the community, but also their ongoing inability to do so effectively.

Terrorist tactics. Knives have commonly been used in Islamist-inspired attacks in Western countries, including Australia's Endeavour Hills attack in 2014, and Islamist propaganda regularly suggests their use. Knives are easy to obtain and therefore one of the few weapons accessible to would-be terrorist attackers in Australia. Khan's relative isolation since his mother's death, combined with his mental health issues, indicate his vulnerability to Islamist extremism, and he may have been targeted by others to undertake the attack.

NOW WHAT?

Strategic messaging. The Australian Government's messaging has been responsible and consistent: Australia's terror alert level remains 'PROBABLE: a terror attack is likely'. This should be maintained. Australia has now experienced four terrorist attacks in two years; all were low-level attacks that appear to have been initiated locally. That Minto was a failed terrorist attack should be stressed.

Strategic messaging should continue to highlight the likelihood of future attacks while communicating both the need for community resilience to withstand them, and efforts underway to prevent them, including 10 disrupted plots in the past two years. Authorities need to continue to invest heavily in prevention, including understanding the link with mental health, as part of the overall CT strategy.

Response capability. This was a simple criminal attack that was responded to quickly by authorities, supported by members of the public. Minto is a useful example of the community responding to protect against an attack while alerting police. The immediate response to the incident, including apprehending and charging the perpetrator and collecting evidence, was within normal JCTT operating capacity and appears to have worked well.

Intelligence sharing. Australian agencies are collaborative and effectively share information. For CT, this is coordinated at the strategic level through the Counter-Terrorism Coordination Centre and managed operationally through JCTTs. The review of links between terrorism and mental health should examine the overall costs and benefits to CT efforts of potentially accessing mental health information.

Terrorist strategy. Australia continues to rate highly in Daesh's list of target countries, and the group is seeking to conduct and inspire attacks. Despite the failure of the Minto attack, Daesh and other groups are likely to claim it as a success and an example for others to follow. Australian authorities might consider the impact of calling low-level criminal acts such as this 'terrorism' and whether this might inadvertently support violent extremist messaging.

Terrorist tactics. Australia's effective measures to prevent and respond to terrorist acts mean extremists have so far been unable to conduct complex attacks on high-profile and mass-casualty targets. This means that unsophisticated, low-level and lone-actor attacks will likely continue to be the most common form of terrorist attack.

CONCLUSION

The Minto attack confirms Islamist extremist incitement to conduct violent acts in Australia, and that this message continues to resonate with some in the Australian community. That the perpetrator had ongoing mental health issues highlights the need to better understand the potential links between mental illness and radicalisation, including committing violent acts.

The quick community and police response to the incident, and relatively low-key media coverage, have usefully limited the propaganda value of this failed terrorist attack.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The review of links between terror suspects' mental health and past criminal behaviour announced in July 2016 should examine:
 - a. the **CT value of sharing mental health information** with CT agencies, including relevance of data the ability of CT agencies to interpret it appropriately and handling issues, including privacy
 - b. **indicators of behaviour** that could be used to inform enhanced reporting regimes to identify those likely to support terrorism but not currently known to authorities in connection with terrorism.
2. Australian CT agencies should enhance **CT strategic communications** by engaging with media and community groups after a terrorism event to share lessons learned on messaging to enhance prevention.
3. Australian governments should review how to **improve public messaging** in describing terrorist acts in Australia to support enhanced CT strategic messaging.

About the author

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