

2020

RESEARCH BRIEF

DOMESTIC JIHADIST THREAT TO AUSTRALIA AND CANADA

2000-2020:

An Overview

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There is surprisingly little systematic and publicly available information on the nature, scale, and evolution of the Jihadist threat in Australia and Canada. Government responses to specific terrorist incidents and annual reports on the terrorist threat provide little insight into the perpetrators, their methods, and intended targets. More information is available in the media, but the data are episodic, scattered, and sometimes unreliable. A handful of good academic studies have examined specific cases or the overall instances of Jihadist terrorism in Australia and Canada.¹ These studies, however, are now often dated, rely on incomplete data, offer limited analyses, and conflate findings on foreign fighters and domestic Jihadist terrorists.² This makes it difficult to understand the specific nature and level of the Jihadist threat faced by each country. This Policy Brief summarizes some of our findings from the first comprehensive study of Australian and Canadian Jihadists arrested for domestic terrorism offences, between 2000 and 2020.

We compiled information on Australian and Canadian Jihadists who were either issued arrest warrants for domestically committed terrorism offences or who died in the commission of such an offence, between 1 January 2000 and 1 January 2020. This means those acting in the name of the Salafi-jihadist strand of Sunni Islamism. Information on 139 actors was organised across four broad categories: personal information (age, education, mental health concerns, etc.), ideology (group affiliation, connections to other known Jihadists, etc.), arrest details (charges, planned target, etc.), and incident details (date, number of casualties, etc.). The bulk of the information came from primary sources, such as court or coronial inquest documents (70%). Additional details were from media sources. We recorded information for 26 variables, but in some instances, we could not acquire all of the desired information.

¹ For example, Sam Mullins, "Islamist Terrorism and Australia: An Empirical Examination of the 'Home-Grown' Threat," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23(2) (2011), pp. 254-285; Sam Mullins, "'Global Jihad': The Canadian Experience," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25(5) (2013), pp. 734-776; Shandon Harris-Hogan, "Anatomy of a Terrorist Cell: A Study of the Network Uncovered in Sydney in 2005," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 5(2) (2013), pp. 137-154; John McCoy and W. Andy Knight, "Homegrown Terrorism in Canada: Local Patterns, Global Trends," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38(4) (2015), pp. 253-274; Alex Wilner, "Canadian Terrorists by the Numbers: An Assessment of Canadians Joining and Supporting Terrorists Groups," Ottawa: Macdonald-Laurier Institute (2019).

² There is reason to believe these groups may be different (see Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107(1) (2013), pp. 1-15). A separate comparative analysis of Australian and Canadian foreign fighters is in progress.

Note: The full analysis of these and additional findings is in an article manuscript under review for publication. A copy may be made available upon request.

1. INCIDENTS

Between 2000 and the beginning of 2020, 13 incidents of Jihadist inspired violence occurred in Australia (7) and Canada (6) – that is completed attacks. The data reveal some remarkable similarities between the incidents and offenders in the two countries.

- The Islamic State (IS) inspired all of the incidents, and they all occurred within the same four-year period (late 2014 and late 2018).
- All 13 incidents were perpetrated by lone actors best characterised as unaffiliated IS sympathisers.
- More specifically, the attacks followed the September 2014 call by Muhammad al-Adnani, the emir of external operations for IS, for indiscriminate attacks in the West by IS supporters, using whatever means possible.
- The overwhelming majority of these attacks were simple, involved few resources, and were unambitious in scope.
- Four of the 13 lone actors seem to have suffered from schizophrenia, four had previous or current substance abuse problems, and three had other potential mental health issues. Contrary to popular belief, however, their attacks did not appear to be irrational and spontaneous. Rather, these lone actors seem to have been very rational in their planning and motives.

1.2 Disrupted and Failed Plots in Australia & Canada

In Australia, a further 21 Jihadist plots were disrupted between 2000 and 2020, with 62 individuals charged with terrorism offences. In Canada, 8 attacks were planned, and 30 individuals subsequently charged with terrorism offences.

Australia

- Before 2014, five Jihadist plots were disrupted in Australia, resulting in 30 arrests.

- Post September 2014, the number of plots dramatically escalated in Australia. Along with the seven lone actor attacks noted above, we identified 16 disrupted or failed Jihadist plots.
- Significantly, 100% of the post September 2014 plots had ties to IS.
- With one exception (Operation Silves), these plots were less resource intensive and less ambitious in scope than the non-IS plots disrupted before 2014.

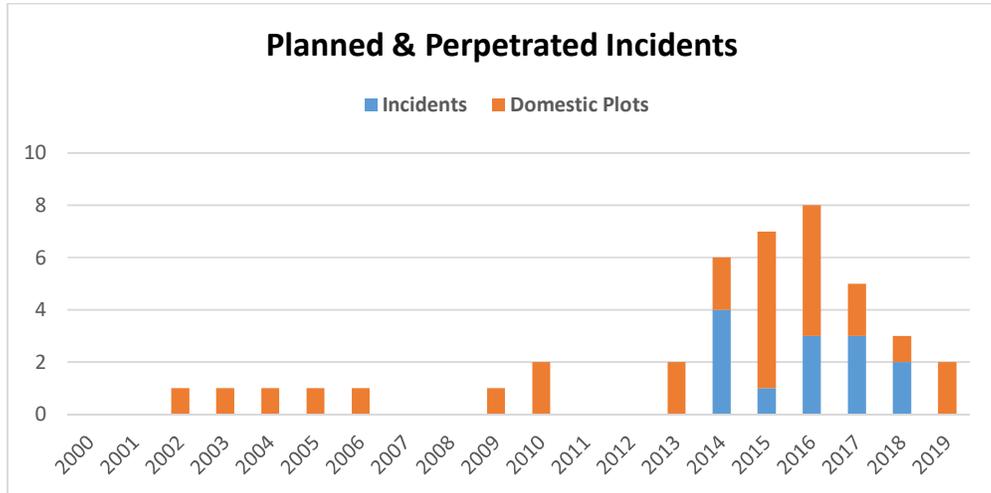
Canada

- Almost double the number of plots emerged in Canada post 2014 (9) compared to the years prior (5).
- In addition, there were almost double the number of lone actor attacks (9), compared to group attacks (5) in Canada, with all lone actor plots (excluding one) occurring after 2014.
- Of these 14 planned plots, only 21% (3) targeted civilians. Canadian Jihadists showed a clear preference for targeting police, military and or government officials.
- More than 50% also planned to use explosives, and overall Canadian Jihadists were more ambitious, in terms of their targets and methods.

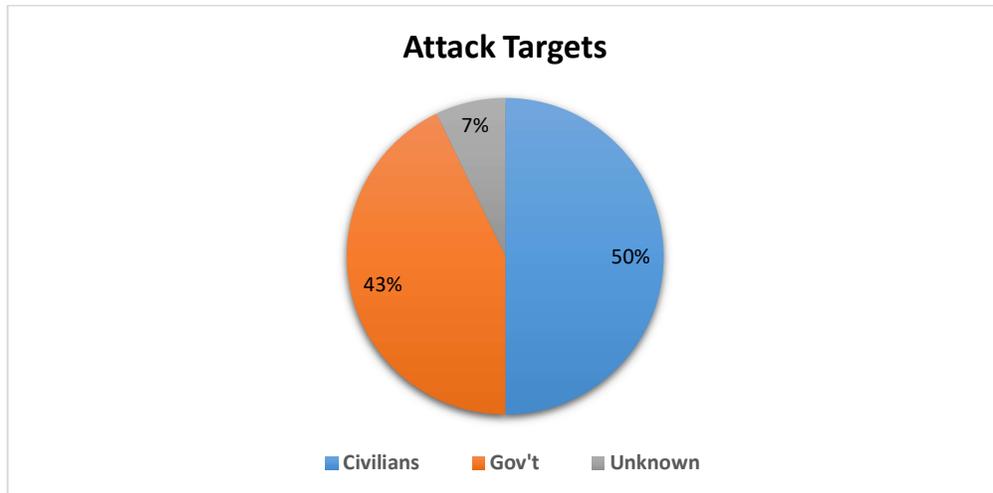
1.3 Comparing Canada and Australia

Prior to September 2014, the size and scale of the Jihadist threat to Canada and Australia was almost identical. Each country faced five plots between 2000 and 2014, arresting 25 and 30 Jihadists respectively. Both countries also faced a series of very similar Jihadist attacks post 2014, in terms of the number of incidents and scale of the attacks.

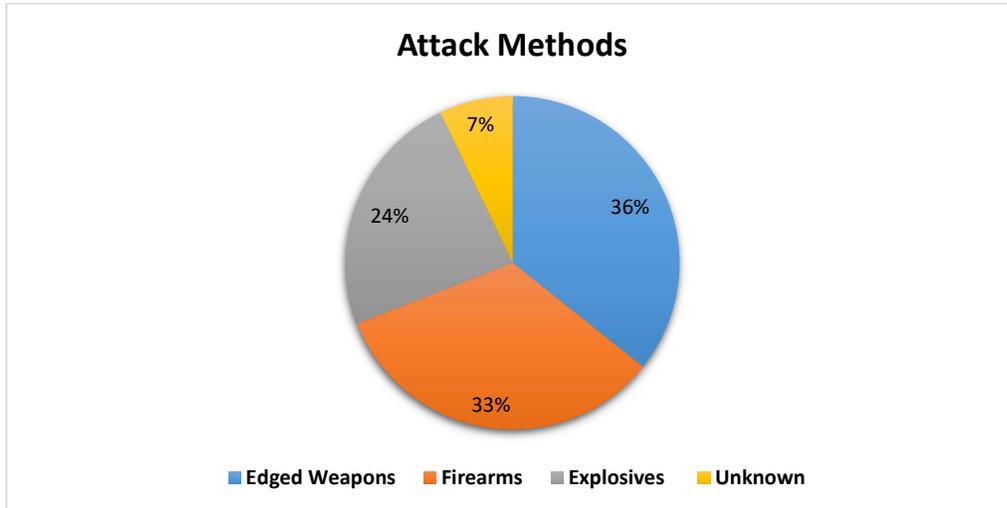
- Looking at the full set of 42 planned and perpetrated Jihadist attacks, there is a clear increase in the number of plots post 2014 (in correlation with the emergence of IS). Since the peak in 2016, the number of incidents seems to be returning to pre-2014 levels.



- The 42 incidents divide almost equally between those targeting civilians (21) and those targeting police, military, and government officials (18). Three targets could not be determined.



- There also is a relatively even distribution of primary attack methodologies, with 15 plots aiming to use edged weapons, 14 firearms, and 10 using explosives. Three attack methodologies could not be determined.



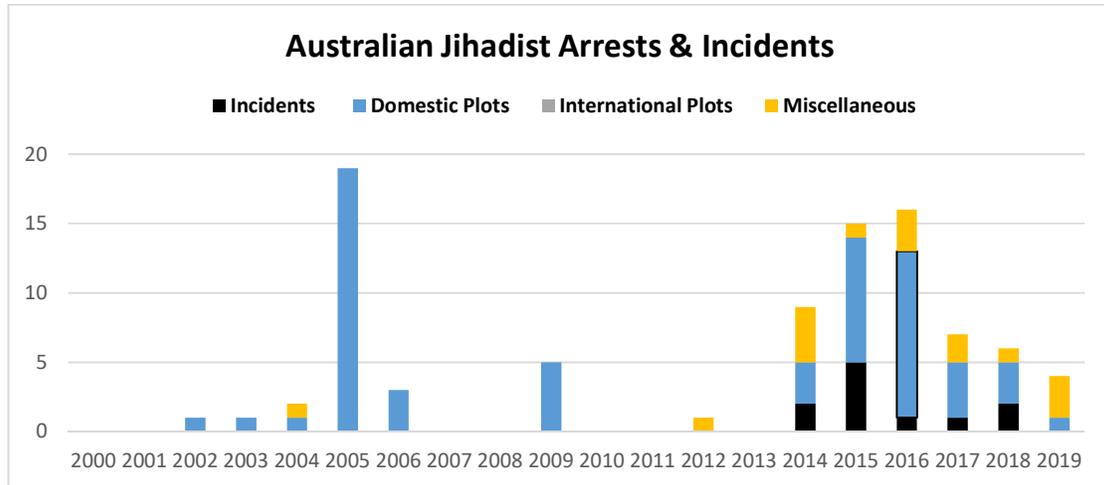
- 60% of planned or perpetrated attacks (25) involved lone actors, almost equally divided between the 52% (13) that were successful and the 48% (12) that were disrupted.
- Target selection had little correlation with the success of the attack.
- There is a correlation with the attack method. Those intending to use edged weapons were more successful (8 of 15) than those using firearms (4 of 14), and most plots involving explosives were disrupted (only 1 of 10 succeeded).
- Interestingly, no plots prior to 2014 planned to use edged weapons.
- All 17 group plots in Australia and Canada were disrupted by security services, regardless of the intended target, primary attack method, or whether the plot was connected in some way with an international terrorist organisation.
- In Australia, 16 Jihadist plots were disrupted in the post 2014 period, while only 3 were intercepted in Canada. The Islamic State was more successful in motivating unaffiliated sympathisers in Australia than in Canada.
- To date, no incidents in Australia or Canada have involved returned foreign fighters from Syria or Iraq.

2. INDIVIDUALS

Australian Jihadists Overall

- We identified 89 domestic actors, with 82% (73) being arrested or killed in the 28 plots noted above.

- Sixteen other Jihadists were arrested, on a range of other charges, including funding a terrorist organisation, creating or disseminating Jihadist propaganda, and membership in a terrorist organisation.

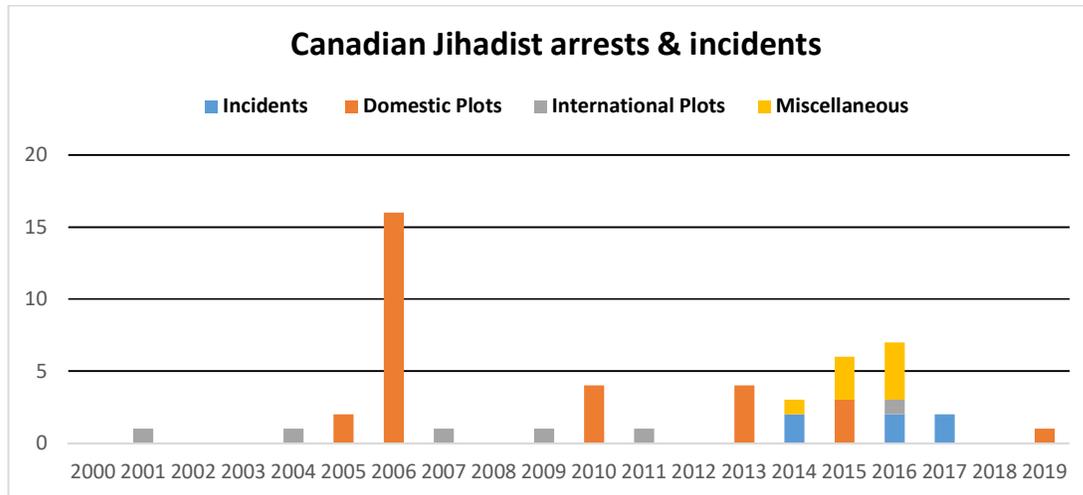


- Overall, 36% of Australian Jihadists were arrested prior to the IS declaration, while 64% emerged in the five or so years post September 2014.³
- With the exception of Momena Shoma (who travelled to Australia from Bangladesh with the intention of carrying out a terrorist attack), 99% (88/89) of the identified Jihadists appear to have radicalised in Australia.

Canadian Jihadists Overall

- Since 2000, we identified 50 domestic Jihadists in Canada, with 72% (36) being arrested or killed in the 28 plots noted above.
- Fourteen other Jihadists were arrested on a range of other terrorism charges. This includes four Canadians arrested in Canada for assisting or facilitating Jihadist attacks internationally, and two Canadians arrested in the US for assisting international Jihadist plots.

³ The spike in arrests in 2005 is the result of Operation Pendennis.

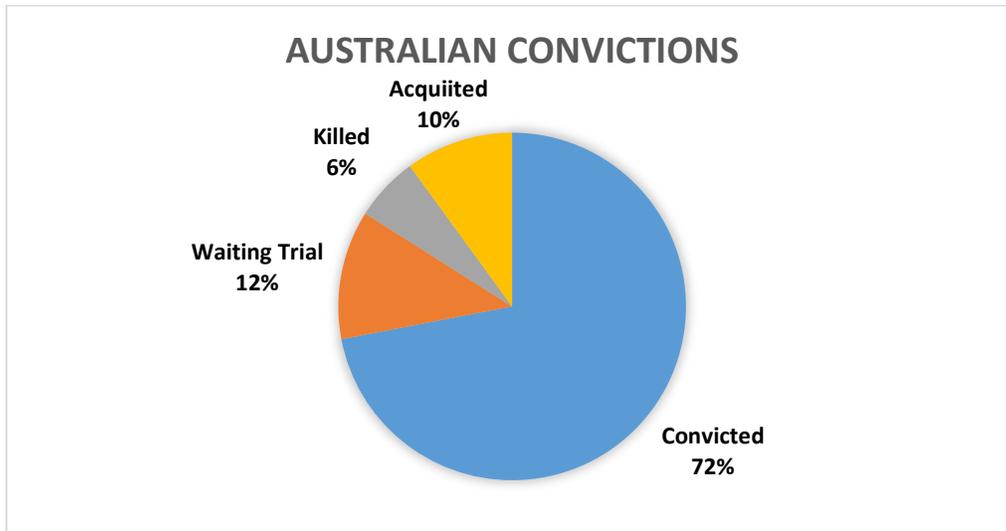


- In total, 62% (31) of Canadian Jihadists were arrested prior to the IS declaration, while 38% (19) emerged in the years post September 2014.⁴
- As noted above, Canada has not seen the same significant increase in IS inspired and controlled plots experienced by Australia post 2014. However, members of the domestic Canadian network, unlike the Australians, have assisted a number of significant international Jihadist plots.

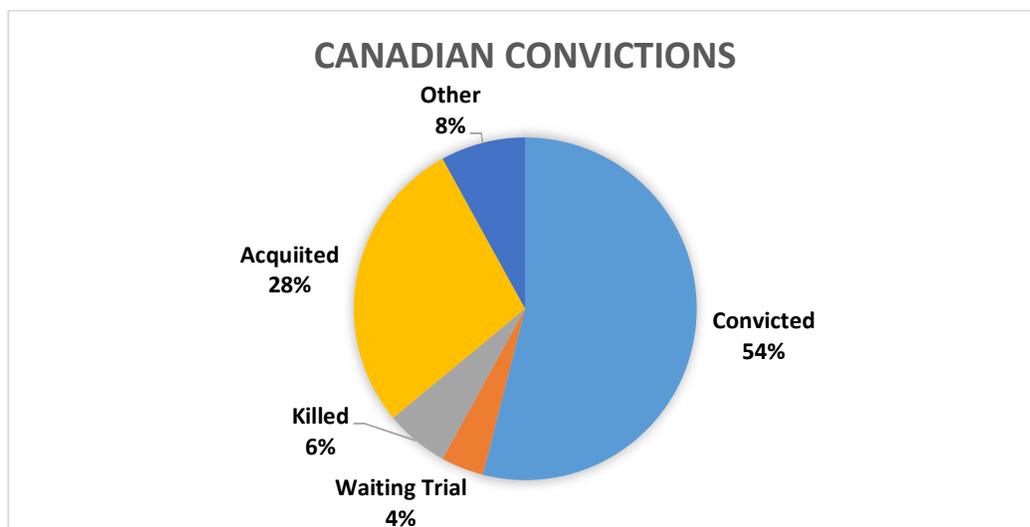
2.1 Convictions

- Most of the 89 Australian Jihadists arrested have been convicted and imprisoned (65), 11 are awaiting trial or retrial, 5 were killed committing a terrorist act, and 9 have been acquitted.

⁴ The spike in arrests in 2006 is the result of the Toronto 18 plot.



- None of the 17 Australian Jihadists convicted of terrorism related offences and released from prison have been rearrested for such offences.
- Only 27 of the 50 Canadian Jihadists have been convicted of terrorism offences and received prison sentences. Fourteen have been acquitted of all terrorism charges, 2 are awaiting trial, and 3 were killed committing a terrorist act. Three others signed Peace Bonds and 1 was placed in custody on a Security Certificate.



- As in Australia, no convicted Canadian Jihadists released from prison were rearrested for domestic terrorism offences in this period.

- Overall, in Australia, approximately three in every four Jihadists arrested were convicted and imprisoned; in Canada, the number is closer to only two in every four.

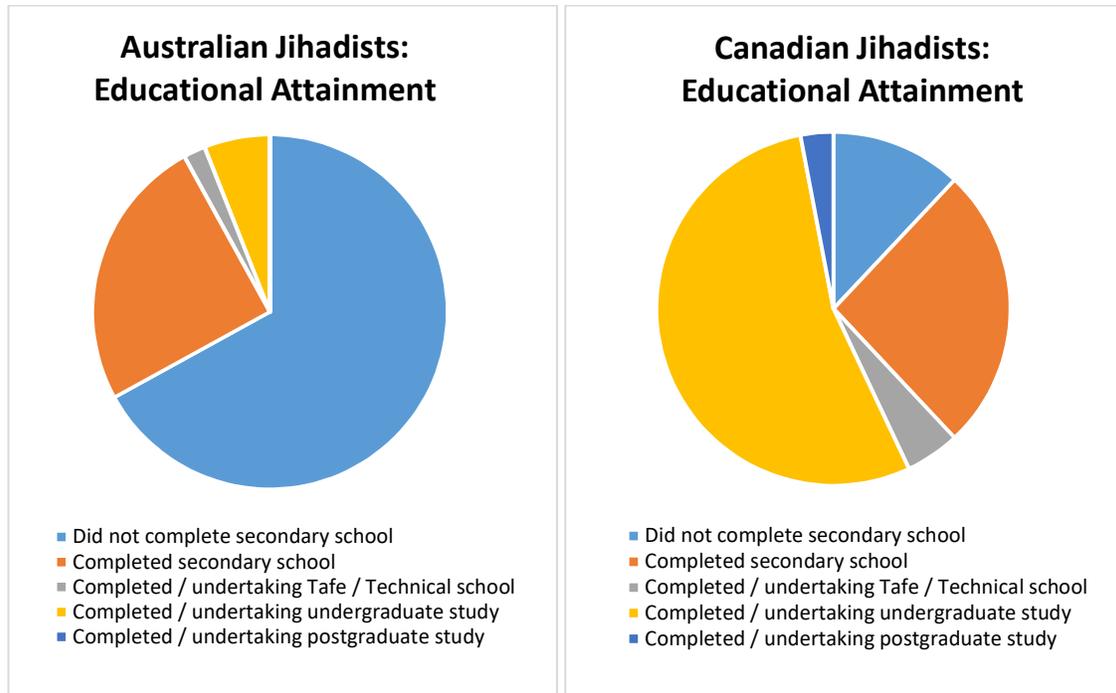
2.3 Age

The average age of Australian Jihadists was 25.4. Looking at the 32 individuals arrested prior to 2014, the average age was over 28. Among the 58 Jihadists arrested or killed post September 2014, the average age drops to just under 24. In fact, 31% (18) of Jihadists that emerged in Australia post 2014 were teenagers, compared to 0% prior to 2014. The overall average age of the known domestic actors in Canada was 26.6.⁵ As with the Australians, the average age dropped from 27.6 pre 2014 to 24.9 following the IS declaration. Teenage Jihadists, however, have been consistently present in the Canadian context.

2.4 Education

Information on the highest level of educational attainment achieved by Jihadists in Australia and Canada is in the charts below. Overall, Canadian Jihadists were significantly better educated. Approximately two in every three Canadian Jihadists had undertaken some form of further education beyond high school. By contrast, approximately two in every three Australian Jihadists did not even complete high school.

⁵ Age information was only available for 46 of the 50 Canadian Jihadists. The four missing individuals, however, were less than 18 years old at the time of their arrest. Hence, the overall average age of Canadian Jihadists is actually lower than presented here.



2.5 Interconnectivity

Twenty-nine per cent (26) of the Australian Jihadists were related by either blood or marriage to at least one other member of the larger network of Jihadists. By contrast, none of the 50 Canadian Jihadists were related by blood, and only four (8%) were related by marriage (two sets of brothers-in-law were arrested in the Toronto 18 case). This contrast is noteworthy, with nearly 30% of the Australian network related by blood or marriage, compared to less than 10% of the Canadian network.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

With a few noteworthy exceptions, the profile provided of Australian and Canadian domestic Jihadist incidents and perpetrators is remarkably similar. Given the broad similarities in the nature and history of the two countries, this is not surprising. A few key differences stand out, as well. There are differences in the nature of the threat, and aspects of the response, that warrant further attention.

Differences in the Threat

- The Islamic State has been much more successful in encouraging Jihadist attacks and plots, post 2014, in Australia than Canada.
- More Canadians have been involved in assisting international Jihadist plots (while living in either Canada or the U.S).
- Canadian Jihadists are much better educated, overall, than Australian Jihadists.
- Many more Australian than Canadian Jihadists have kinship ties (through blood and marriage) to broader national Jihadist networks.

Differences in the Response

- Australia has been much more successful in disrupting Jihadist attacks and plots.
- Many more Canadian Jihadists have been acquitted of terrorism charges.

Recommendations:

The following recommendations are largely, and most immediately, about further lines of inquiry. Each recommendation, however, has implications for planning and directing counter-terrorism and prevention efforts.

(1) These findings reinforce the notion that there are discernible and consequential trends, perhaps global in nature, in the number and types of Jihadist terrorist incidents and plots (for example, the common and pronounced pattern of findings for the pre and post 2014 periods in Australia and Canada).

(2) The rapid upsurge in the number of low resource lone actor attacks and plots in both countries, documents the significant effect that some calls to action, sometimes by charismatic leaders, can have. We need to develop a more precise understanding of the conditions influencing the relative success or failure of such calls in inspiring terrorist acts.

(3) Differences in the nature of Jihadist networks may be a significant variable in accounting for the larger number of planned and perpetrated attacks in Australia post 2014. Our data suggest that the greater presence of familial ties in Australia may be consequential. Further

investigation of this link is recommended, in part through the application of Social Network Analysis.⁶

(4) The different conviction rates in Australia and Canada may be a cause for concern in Canada. While this study documents the contrast, the reasons for the difference could be multiple and complex. Given the marked similarities between the societies and their legal systems, further investigation of the substance and sources of this difference is recommended.

(5) The marked similarity of the Australian and Canadian experience with Jihadism is significant in itself. It may indicate that certain shared social structural variables are consequential, at least for Jihadism. An expanded analysis is recommended, introducing pertinent data on some of these social structural variables and making additional comparisons with developed nations with different histories, and social, economic, political, and legal conditions.

(6) While large databases, such as the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (<https://www.start.umd.edu/research-projects/global-terrorism-database-gtd>), serve important functions, they need to be supplemented with more detailed and precise national datasets.⁷ Our limited analysis of Australian and Canadian Jihadists indicates some of the advantages. These datasets should be expanded, however, to include more variables and ideologies.⁸

⁶ For example, Marie Ouellet and Martin Bouchard, "The 40 Members of the Toronto 18: Group Boundaries and the Analysis of Illicit Networks," *Deviant Behavior* 39 (11), 2018: 1467-1482; David C. Hofmann, "How 'Alone' are Lone Actors: Exploring the Ideological, Signaling, and Support Networks of Lone-Actor Terrorists," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, first online version published 2 Oct. 2018

⁷ The development of the Canadian Incident Database (CIBD) (<https://www.tsas.ca/canadian-incident-database/>), for example, highlighted some serious limitations in the GTD. The GTD, for example, records 69 incidents of domestic terrorism in Canada, between 1960 and 2015. Using selection criteria modelled on the GTD, the CIBD records 871 incidents in the same time period (Nicole Tishler, Marie Ouellet, and Joshua Kilberg, "A Survey of Terrorism in Canada: 1960-2015," in J. Littlewood, L.L. Dawson, and S.K. Thompson, eds., *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Canada*, University of Toronto Press, 2020, pp. 25-48).

⁸ It would be beneficial to support the development of a Canadian equivalent to PIRUS (Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States); (<https://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus>), for example.

(7) More comprehensive and comparable databases of this kind can be used to inform counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) policy discussions, and governments have an instrumental role to play in funding the regular, reliable, and independent, updating, analysis, and development of these datasets.

(8) The remarkably small number of Jihadists planning/perpetrating acts of violence in Australia and Canada, calls into question CVE programs targeting entire communities, based on geographic or demographic factors. The persistence of a threat over 20 years, however, points to the need for highly targeted CVE intervention programs with the capability to pre-emptively work with individuals connected to violent extremist networks or expressing support for violent extremist ideologies.