Interview - Issac Kfir

Isaac Kfir is currently the Director of the National Security Program and Head of the Counterterrorism Policy Centre at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a Canberra-based think-tank. He works on counterterrorism, national security, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), international refugee law and post-conflict reconstruction. He received a BA (Hons) in History from the University of Buckingham, an MA from the University of Kent, and a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science. He also has a Post-graduate diploma in Law and a Bar Vocational Course degree from BPP Law School, London. Isaac was an Associate Professor of International Relations at the Institute for International Strategy, Tokyo International University (TIU), Japan. Prior to this he was a Visiting Assistant Professor of Law and International Relations at Syracuse University where he was also the Associate Director of the Mapping Global Insecurities Project at the Moynihan Institute for Global Affairs. Isaac is the author and co-author of many empirical, analytical research studies that have appeared in such journals as *Defense Studies*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, *Comparative Strategy*, and *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* on such issues as the Pakistan Taliban, the Islamic State, al-Shabaab, NATO and human security. Using his legal training, Isaac has authored legal studies on post-conflict justice, international refugee law, and national security law. These have appeared in such leading journals as the *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* and the *Texas Journal of Women & the Law*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

My work is divided between counter-terrorism, and national security, which overlap with traditional security. On the counter-terrorism side I examine the pull and push factors behind violent extremism, and deradicalization and disengagement policies. I also look at terrorist groups, mainly Salafi-jihadi groups, but increasingly I also look at the far-right. There is a robust debate on the future of Salafi-jihadism, specifically what will happen to ISIL, and whether it will get more traction than al-Qaeda. For example, we see ISIL franchises being more active in the Sahel, Central Africa, and Southern Africa, which could be a major concern as those areas are affected by weak and fragile government. This means that groups like ISIL, which has enormous cash reserves, can send their activists to those spaces to incite and recruit new members to its cause. There is also interesting work on returning foreign fighters and what to do with women and children. The work here covers an array of topics from citizenship revocation to obligations of states to these people. An additional area where there is fantastic research is the cultural crimes committed by ISIL, such as the destruction of historical artefacts

On national security, I look at defence and strategy but also climate breakdown, and food security. The introduction of human security in the late 1990s changed the security discourse as we no longer focus solely on traditional security. There is a fantastic body of research on health, education, food, and of course climate change. We have come to see security in more holistic terms as opposed to just the state, although I will say that over the last few years traditional security thinking is making a comeback, possibly because countries such as China and Russia seem to openly challenge the post-WWII liberal international order. We see this with the Chinese in the South China Sea, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and land reclamation. The Russian approach is based on challenging the liberal order through cyber but also traditional security means such as taking over Crimea. They also use conflict to advance their national interest, this is most visible in Syria, although it can also be seen in Libya.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most

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significant shifts in your thinking?

This is a great question. I would argue that the change from a bipolar world to a multipolar world has become more noticeable the older I get. I recognise that American hegemony has ended (a post-Pax Americana). I was certainly influenced by Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* which came out in 1987, but which I only read in the mid-1990s. To enjoy the book, one needs to read it with Edward Gibbon's majestic*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. These books underlie that all 'empires' come to an end, but what was unique about Kennedy's work was that he argued that the US had an option, in that if it was to recognise that its power would wane, it could take measures to make the process as undisruptive and as painless as possible. The Trump administration seems to encourage this demise because Donald Trump is a transactional person who believes in chaos, which is contrary to what international politics have come to expect. For over 70 years, the international system relied on the US to ensure stability, but now the US seems to actively promote instability, leading lesser powers to look at China, for example, to help gain stability.

Since moving to Australia, I have become more aware of China's demand for a place under the sun and was fascinated by President Xi's speech to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China given in October 2018. I was influenced by Graham Allison's *The Thucydides Trap*. These have helped shape my understanding of China and its goals (especially when considering Gibbon and Kennedy's works). The Chinese are getting traction because 1) They are providing cash incentives; 2) They are revamping the BRI system because it is being criticised; 3) They recognise the power of the market and of people. This is playing out most clearly on the 5G and Huawei issue because even though there is justified concern about the company and the network, the Chinese know that ordinary people just want fast, reliable and cheap internet access; 4) The US isn't providing an alternative (or leadership) to China or Russia because President Trump is too divisive.

What is your rationale for studying terrorist groups, radicalisation and political violence?

I am a social constructivist, influenced by rationalism, so I am keen to understand how and why people resort to political violence. I take the view that no one wakes up one morning and decides to become a terrorist. I, therefore, see it as a process. Due to limitation regarding travel, linguistic shortcomings and insufficient ethnographic training, I am interested in the macro aspect of terrorist groups and radicalization (the overarching pull and push factors) as oppose to looking at the specific individual and why they became a terrorist.

I am also intrigued by the securitization of the field. I have greatly enjoyed the work of John Muller and Mark Stewart who have raised serious questions as to whether we have got our spending priorities correctly. I do think that when compared to other emerging threats such as climate breakdown, threats to the international liberal order and obesity, terrorism gets too much attention, mainly because of the many perceptions associated with it. I also think that there is a racialist aspect to our current preoccupation with terrorism that feeds into a larger narrative that resonates with some of the ideas of Edward Said.

In light of the attacks in New Zealand and Sri Lanka, have you seen any notable shifts in the causes of terrorism and political violence in the Asia-Pacific region?

This is a tough question to answer because there are so many different drivers in the region. Generally, the drivers remain nationalism and self-determination, poor socio-economic conditions, religion etc. What tends to change is the introduction of new themes or ideas within the existing grievances as opposed to new causes. For example, we aren't seeing gender (female) based terrorist groups, nor are we seeing environmental terrorism. Andrew Silke and John Morrison are now looking to see if there is a link between terrorism and climate change. What we are seeing is a rehashing of old themes such as nationalism, political marginalisation, socio-economic.

Both the Christchurch terrorist attack and the attacks on the churches in Sri Lanka surprised a lot of people as these weren't areas that we expected attacks. New Zealand was a lone actor attack and Sri Lanka maybe showed how marginal groups could reach out or embrace the ideas of ISIL. Sri Lanka was also more of a policy failure because it seems that the authorities were warned but because the political system is so fragmented, they failed to take

effective actions. It seems that both attacks were reactive, i.e. Christchurch was about the replacement theory and Sri Lanka was possibly a revenge attack for Christchurch and/or was undertaken to undermine the Sri Lankan government and state – the country relies on tourism and by creating a culture of fear, one discourages westerners from travelling to the country (there are reports that the government is predicting a sharp decline in tourism next year).

What is Australia's policy towards counterterrorism and what is your assessment of it?

Counterterrorism refers to legislation but also to a host of soft measures aimed to counter and prevent violent extremism. On some issues, Australia is very much ahead of the curve. Some of the folks working on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) are exceptional, especially at the state and territories level. They know the material inside out and are committed to preventing many young people from engaging in violent extremism. Australia has adopted over 60 pieces of legislation or made amendments, which I think is too much. Where we need to do more, is on the issue of resilience and preparing the public to deal with a mass casualty attack. There needs to be more education about what to do in a terrorist attack, how not to panic and that a terror threat does not undermine Australia. The state of Victoria is running an exceptional campaign highlighting social cohesion entitled 'Victorian. And Proud of It', which is what is needed. It should not be the job of government to talk about social cohesion or 'Australian values', as these are divisive issues, what the government must do is let people recognise that diversity is part of our identity and that 'Australian values' is a term and concept open to change and evolution. It is not static.

To what extent do Asia-Pacific countries cooperate to counter terrorism?

I think there is a need to recognise that sovereignty is treated differently across the Asia-Pacific, as is the issue of terrorism. First, many of the countries were former colonies, which makes them very jealous when any attempt to challenge their sovereign right emerges. Second, as former colonies many of these countries had fought their way to independence via what some had called at the time terrorist groups, so, therefore, there is always going to be a definitional challenge.

Where we do see cooperation and some multilateral engagement is on specific issues such as countering terrorism finance or cybersecurity. There has been good development within the ASEAN countries on cross border cooperation; Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia engage in trilateral patrols of the Malacca Straits. In 2018, Australia hosted the ASEAN–Australia Special Summit leading to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperation to Counter International Terrorism. Australia has supported the establishment of the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC). There are also more conversations on how to enhance ASEAN's security identity and on how to better cooperate on security and police matters. This can be seen in the 2017 signing of an agreement allowing police forces in the region to exchange intelligence information; and in the reinvigoration of ASEANAPOL (everything is slow in the region, ASEANAPOL was established in 1981, and only now do we begin to feel its presence).

The key to remember is that Asia-Pacific countries are affected by terrorism differently and therefore their response and demands are different. For example, Pakistan describes some terrorists as miscreants and refuses to accept its role in the development of the Taliban. They have many tensions with their Afghan and Indian neighbours as a result. I suspect that when it comes to the region, the bar for cooperation will remain low because the countries in the region do not come to cooperation easily. They need to see the value for their national security first, then develop back channels, work out a process, sign some loosely-phrased and structured agreements and wait for the next generation of policymakers to bring those mechanisms to fruition.

How should states handle returning ISIL fighters? Do they pose a threat to national security?

This is a tough question. We see different approaches to returning foreign fighters. Australia, for example, has taken, at least publicly a zero-tolerance approach. Dual nationals have had their citizenship revoked. Others such as Malaysia and Indonesia have explored repatriation and deradicalization/disengagement. Malaysia, for example, has the Putrajaya's rehabilitation and reintegration programme, which it explains has a 98% success rate which is rather

suspect.

As to whether these individuals pose a national security threat, we simply don't know. There aren't many examples of returning foreign fighters who had committed acts of terrorism (none in Australia). There are suggestions that some of the Sri Lanka bombers were sent by ISIL or had relations with ISIL, but they weren't exactly your typical returnees like Mark Taylor, known as Kiki Jihadi. There are also the kids of Khaled Sharrouf, one of the most notorious Australian jihadis – we aren't sure if they pose a threat, and there are supposed to be 80 Australian children in Iraq and Syria. This issue highlights how looking at ISIL fighters as a single group or entity is a problem.

What is the most important advice that you would give to young scholars studying International Relations?

As you enter the discipline think about what you want to do the day after graduation. Think about doing internships (as many as possible, though ideally, you want to have paid internships), apply to as many grants as possible. It is important to see international relations as a broad subject that can have many usages from public service to journalism to private business. Studying international relations gives one a broad brush understanding of international politics, which is why it is worth trying out internships in business and journalism. Also, I would appreciate the value of theory and methods – having the ability to critically analyse information is invaluable.