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# The Role of Virtual Planners in the 2015 Anzac Day Terror Plot

Andrew Zammit

This case study shows how the 2015 Anzac Day terror plot resulted from virtual planning, which is an operational method the Islamic State has used widely since 2014. The article traces how the Melbourne-based perpetrator received online instructions on four components of the intended attack: choosing targets, making tactical preparations, maintaining commitment, and ensuring publicity. The article demonstrates the importance of the concept of virtual planning for understanding Australia's current terror threat and examines aspects of the plot, particularly the involvement of a UK-based juvenile, valuable for understanding the Islamic State's ability to initiate violence in Australia and elsewhere.

Anzac Day is Australia's most prominent military commemoration, marked every 25 April in cities and towns with a dawn ceremony followed by a veterans' and families' parade. In the lead-up to Anzac Day in 2015, a local Islamic State (IS) supporter prepared to murder police officers to "make sure the dogs remember this as well as [their] fallen heroes".<sup>1</sup> Had security agencies failed to disrupt the terror plot, the day could have been forever marred by murder on Melbourne's streets.

This article examines how this terror plot developed. It focuses on the role of IS figures outside Australia, showing how the plot serves as an example of what have been described as *virtually planned* attacks, which is an operational method IS has heavily relied on to expand its reach.

The article first outlines the concept of virtually planned IS attacks, using international examples. It then shows how the 2015 Anzac Day terror plot emerged and traces how it was guided from abroad with regard to four components: choosing targets, making tactical preparations, maintaining commitment, and ensuring publicity. It draws out the implications of this and highlights one of the plot's distinctive features: that a UK-based teenager was able to play a prominent role, which this operational method enabled. Overall this case study shows the importance of the concept of virtual planning for understanding Australia's current terror threat, while also demonstrating dynamics relevant to understanding virtually planned attacks elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Queen v Besim [2016] VSC 537 (5 September 2016), p. 2, <aucc.sirsidynix.net.au/Judgments/VSC/2016/T0537.pdf> [Accessed 13 November 2016].

<sup>2</sup> From this point the article will refer to the 2015 Anzac Day terror plot simply as the "Anzac plot", but there is evidence that there was also a terror plot intended for Anzac Day in 2016.

## The Islamic State's Virtual Planners

IS has several different ways to promote violence abroad. Sometimes its public exhortations inspire unconnected individuals to attack in its name, as occurred with the murder of a Canadian soldier in Quebec in October 2014 and the hostage-taking at a Sydney cafe the next December.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, some of its deadliest attacks were centrally planned by senior IS figures in Syria and Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Within IS, some commanders direct operations in regions they are familiar with, often dispatching foreign fighters to attack their home countries. Prime examples are the massacres in Paris and Brussels, believed to be directed from Syria by French national Salim Benghalem and run by returnees such as Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Najim Laachraoui.<sup>5</sup>

However, several plots fit somewhere in between, being neither centrally planned by IS nor simply carried out by inspired individuals acting on their own initiative. Nathaniel Barr, Madeleine Blackman, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng have highlighted a subset which they term *virtually planned* attacks.<sup>6</sup>

This refers to attacks where the perpetrators had not travelled to the conflict zone or joined a formal chain of command, but were nonetheless in regular contact with IS operatives instructing them from IS territory. These operatives, often based in Syria's Raqqa province, have guided attacks in multiple continents by using encrypted online communication platforms to advise aspiring jihadists on how to carry out their violence in a manner that serves IS's strategy. In many cases, the IS operatives are in near-constant communication with the attacker and provide encouragement and detailed advice for each step of the attack.

Judging from various attacks across the world, the advice virtual planners provide can be broken down into at least four components:

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See Jared Owens, 'Teen Boy Charged over Anzac Day Terror Plot', *The Australian*, 25 April 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Gollom and Tracey Lindeman, 'Who is Martin Couture-Rouleau?', *CBC News*, 21 October 2014; Commonwealth of Australia, State of New South Wales, *Martin Place Siege: Joint Commonwealth—New South Wales Review* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, February 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, 'Radicalization in the U.S. and the Rise of Terrorism', testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 14 September 2016.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, 'Bloody Ramadan: How the Islamic State Coordinated a Global Terrorist Campaign', *War On The Rocks*, 20 July 2016; Bridget Moreng, 'ISIS' Virtual Puppeteers: How They Recruit and Train "Lone Wolves"', *Foreign Affairs*, 21 September 2016; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, 'ISIL's Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation', *War On The Rocks*, 4 January 2017.

- Targets: An IS virtual planner told Mohammad Daleel, a German-based IS supporter, to detonate his explosives in a restaurant when the music festival he initially targeted became unfeasible.<sup>7</sup> Another virtual planner provided a US-based IS supporter, Munir Abdulkader, with the address of a US military employee to behead.<sup>8</sup>
- Tactics: IS planners instructed a cell in India to use the explosive Triacetone Triperoxide (TATP) and a cell of French women to use a vehicle filled with gas bottles.<sup>9</sup> Munir Abdulkader's planner had to give detailed instructions on what type of knives and duct tape to use in his beheading plot.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes tactical advice can be about operational security, such as which forms of encryption to use. Mohammed Ibrahim Yazdani, involved in the plot in India, was advised to use the Tails operating system, which "is contained on a USB stick and allows a user to boot up a computer from the external device and use it without leaving a trace on the hard drive".<sup>11</sup>
- Commitment: Virtual planners can provide encouragement and emotional support up until the moment of attack. One US-based plotter, Emanuel Lutchman, had doubts about his plot but was patiently reassured by his planner.<sup>12</sup> Riaz Khan, who attacked train passengers in Germany with an axe, was guided through the plot's final moments. He told his Syria-based planner "I am now waiting for the train" and "I am starting now", to which he received the response "now you will enter paradise".<sup>13</sup>
- Publicity: One of the most important aspects of virtual planning is making sure that an attack generates the right sort of publicity. After all, a central communicative purpose of terrorism is to propagate a movement's message. The attackers are expected to send martyrdom videos to the planner, to be released by IS's media wing *al-Amaq* after the attack. Rachid Kassim, suspected of guiding several plots in Europe, advised perpetrators that their videos "must

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, 'Terror Plots in Germany, France Were "Remote-Controlled" by Islamic State Operatives', *The Long War Journal*, 24 September 2016.

<sup>8</sup> United States Department of Justice, 'Ohio Man Sentenced to 20 Years in Prison for Plot to Attack U.S. Government Officers', Justice News, 23 November 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, 'Bloody Ramadan'; Moreng, 'ISIS' Virtual Puppeteers'.

<sup>10</sup> United States Department of Justice, 'Ohio Man Sentenced to 20 Years in Prison for Plot to Attack U.S. Government Officers'. See also this tweeted summary of court material:

<[twitter.com/SeamusHughes/status/796793272589025280](https://twitter.com/SeamusHughes/status/796793272589025280)> [Accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>11</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, 'Not "Lone Wolves" After All: How ISIS Guides World's Terror Plots from Afar', *New York Times*, 4 February 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Joscelyn, 'Terror Plots in Germany, France Were "Remote-Controlled" by Islamic State operatives'.

contain an oath of allegiance and a message of *dawa*" (proselytisation).<sup>14</sup>

Not every virtually planned attack features all four components (for example, sometimes the plotter may already be fully committed or have a firm target in mind), and planners may advise on other components (such as the timing), but these four appear to be the most common. In some cases, which appear to be the minority, virtual planning goes beyond providing advice and involves remotely orchestrating logistical support.<sup>15</sup> For example, the pair of IS supporters who murdered an eighty-five-year-old priest in France in July 2016 only met each other a few days beforehand, in a meeting arranged by their Syria-based IS handler.<sup>16</sup> Sid Ahmed Ghlam, who attempted a shooting attack on a French church in April 2015, was told where to find a bag of automatic weapons left in a parked car, which had been arranged by his IS planners in Syria who were tapping into criminal networks in France.<sup>17</sup>

However, remote orchestration of logistical support can blur the dividing line between a virtually planned attack and a more direct one. To provide clarity, this article offers the following definition of virtual planning:<sup>18</sup>

A virtually planned terrorist plot occurs when one or more people (the planner/s) are in direct communication with one or more people (the perpetrator/s) located in the target country to provide them with advice for carrying out a terrorist attack, usually relating to one or more of the following: targets, tactics, commitment, or publicity. In some cases the planner/s may remotely orchestrate logistical support (such as introducing perpetrators to each other or arranging for others to provide weapons), but this does not involve direct forms of assistance that would go clearly beyond a common understanding of the term "virtual" (such as dispatching an operative into the target country to assist the perpetrator/s, or training a perpetrator).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Moreng, 'ISIS' Virtual Puppeteers'.

<sup>15</sup> Clare Ellis, 'With a Little Help from my Friends: An Exploration of the Tactical Use of Single-Actor Terrorism by the Islamic State', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6 (2016), pp. 41-47.

<sup>16</sup> Callimachi, 'Not "Lone Wolves" After All'.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> This definition is based on current writings on the concept and commonalities across such plots, but not all writers using the term use it the precise same way.

<sup>19</sup> One dilemma is that for a plot to be virtually planned by a particular terrorist organisation, the planners should be officially authorised by the organisation to play that role, but the relationship that the planners have to IS's central leadership is not always clear. According to the work of Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman, among others, IS virtual planners function as part of an IS external operations and espionage branch called the Amniyat al-Kharji. However, Nesser, Sternersen and Oftedal have found cases where it is unclear what part of IS the virtual planners were based in: "these handlers may, or may not operate under IS's international operations section". The internal operations of IS will likely remain opaque for some time, and this article does not engage in the discussion over which particular part of IS virtual planners belong to. It can generally be presumed that an IS operative providing instructions from IS territory is doing so with some sort of official sanction, otherwise they would be running a great risk. Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman, 'ISIL's Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation'; Petter Nesser,

These attacks have also been described with different terms. Thomas Joscelyn and Peter Neumann have referred to them as “remote-controlled” plots, as have French and German authorities.<sup>20</sup> In Hegghammer and Nesser’s six-part 2015 typology, virtually planned attacks match Type 4, “remote contact with directives”.<sup>21</sup> However, the term ‘virtually planned’ will be used for this article.

Virtual planning has been a valuable operational method for IS, and been used extensively. According to Nesser, Stenersen and Oftedal’s 2016 dataset, there were thirty-eight IS-associated terror plots in Europe between January 2014 and October 2016.<sup>22</sup> Of these thirty-eight, at least sixteen fit the criteria for virtually planned plots.<sup>23</sup> Seamus Hughes and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens found that up to one-fifth of IS-associated plots in the United States between March 2014 and March 2017 were virtually planned, and suggested that the proportion may be found to be larger when more court material becomes available.<sup>24</sup> In Malaysia, virtual planning was reportedly involved in half of all IS terror plots. Of thirteen foiled plots between 2013 and September 2016, seven are believed to have been remotely instructed by a Malaysian IS member in Syria.<sup>25</sup> In Indonesia the proportion is less clear, but several plots involved virtual planning. Most importantly, a Syria-based Indonesian IS member remotely initiated the shooting and grenade attack against a Jakarta mall in January 2016, which killed four members of the public.<sup>26</sup>

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Anne Stenersen and Emilie Oftedal, ‘Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6 (2016), p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Joscelyn, ‘Terror Plots in Germany, France Were “Remote-Controlled” by Islamic State operatives’; Melissa Eddy, ‘Germany Investigates if Boy, 12, Planted Bomb at Christmas Market’, *New York Times*, 16 December 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, ‘Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> Nesser et al., ‘Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect’, p.4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix 2. Nesser, Stenersen and Oftedal refer to nineteen plots which “involve online instruction from members of IS’s networks”, but not all of these meet the definition of virtual planning used here, as some involved returned fighters. The sixteen plots which do meet the criteria used here, using Nesser, Stenersen and Oftedal’s labels, are: Ghlam church bomb plot, plot against French military base, Touloun Navy Base plot, Coulibaly’s role in the Charlie Hebdo attack, Lyon gas factory attack, swingers club plot, Paris policeman home attack, Normandy priest beheading, car bomb plot near Notre Dame, Würzburg axe attack, Ansbach suicide bombing, Schleswig-Holstein plot, Remembrance Day plot, Junead Khan Serviceman plot, Ceuta plot, and Vienna teenager bombing plot.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Seamus Hughes, ‘The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State’s Virtual Entrepreneurs’, *CTC Sentinel*, 9 March 2017, pp. 1, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Chinyong Liow, ‘Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Southeast Asia’, in Jacinta Carroll (ed.), *Counterterrorism Yearbook 2017* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 2017), p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> Greg Fealy, ‘Terrorism in Indonesia in 2016’, in Jacinta Carroll (ed.), *Counterterrorism Yearbook 2017* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 2017), pp. 22-23.

Virtual planning is a recent development that emerged as part of IS's widespread use of social media and other online means to mobilise transnational support, which reached an unprecedented scale from 2014 onwards.<sup>27</sup> This operational method has enabled IS to orchestrate violence in places where its capabilities were too limited for centrally planned attacks. This was brutally demonstrated during Ramadan 2016 when IS-associated terror plots, some relying on this virtual approach, occurred in ten different countries.<sup>28</sup> This operational method is particularly relevant to countries like Australia, where IS has lacked the advanced capabilities it had in Paris and Brussels.

This method has been used several times against Australia, as demonstrated by some recent counter-terrorism prosecutions. One virtually planned plot was foiled in Sydney in February 2015, and involved a two-man cell receiving instructions from an IS member in Syria.<sup>29</sup> Another was foiled in Melbourne in May 2015, where the plotter was attempting to build improvised explosive devices and had received some instructions from Syria-based British IS member Junaid Hussein.<sup>30</sup> Virtual planning also appears to have played a role in some of the alleged plots that have not yet been through court, though it will be necessary to wait until trials are completed to gather solid information. For example, in September 2014 Syria-based Australian IS member Mohammad Ali Baryalei allegedly ordered supporters in Sydney to murder a random member of the public.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> On virtual planning being a recent development, see Nesser et al., 'Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect', pp. 9-10. For IS's use of online communication methods on an unprecedented scale, see Levi J. West, '#jihad: Understanding Social Media as a Weapon', *Security Challenges*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2016), pp. 9-26; Jason Burke, 'The Age of Selfie Jihad: How Evolving Media Technology is Changing Terrorism', *CTC Sentinel*, 30 November 2016. On earlier jihadist use of online communication, see Pete Lentini, 'The Transference of Neojihadism: Towards a Process Theory of Transnational Radicalisation', in Sayed Khateb, Muhammad Bakashmar and Ela Ogru (eds), *Radicalisation Crossing Borders: New Directions in Islamist and Jihadist Political, Intellectual and Theological Thought and Practice: Conference Proceedings* (Melbourne: Global Terrorism Research Centre, Monash University, 2009); Aaron Y. Zelin, *The State of Global Jihad Online: A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross-Lingual Analysis* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, February 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, 'Bloody Ramadan'.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Hoerr and Jessica Kidd, 'Informant Warned ASIO of Planned Sydney Terrorist Attack', *ABC News*, 14 September 2016; *R v Al-Kutobi*; *R v Kiad* [2016] NSWSC 1760 (9 December 2016), <[www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/nsw/NSWSC/2016/1760.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/nsw/NSWSC/2016/1760.html)> [Accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>30</sup> *K v Children's Court of Victoria & Anor* [2015] VSC 645 (18 November 2015), <[www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/vic/VSC/2015/645.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/vic/VSC/2015/645.html)> [Accessed 19 November 2016]; *The Queen v M H K* [2016] VSC 742 (7 December 2016), <[www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/vic/VSC/2016/742.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/vic/VSC/2016/742.html)> [Accessed 4 January 2017]; Padraic Murphy, 'Melbourne Mother's Day Terrorist Bomb Plotter Instructed by Jihadist Junaid Hussain', *Herald Sun*, 5 September 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Cameron Stewart, 'The Order to Kill that Triggered Operation Appleby', *The Australian*, 19 September 2016.

However, one of the clearest cases of virtual planning is the 2015 Anzac plot. The following sections examine this plot, using information primarily from court material made available after the aspiring attacker was sentenced. They show how virtual planning was manifested through the key components of targets, tactics, commitment and publicity, and also highlight distinctive aspects of this plot relevant for understanding virtually planned attacks elsewhere.

### **Background to the Anzac Plot**

The perpetrator of the Anzac plot was a Melbourne teenager named Sevdet Besim. He was arrested in a Victorian Joint Counter-Terrorism Team (JCTT) raid on the morning of 18 April 2015 and pleaded guilty two years later.<sup>32</sup> Four other suspects were arrested that morning as part of Operation Rising, the JCTT's investigation into the plot, but none were proven to be involved. Two of the suspects were quickly released without charge. Another suspect, Mehren Azami, pleaded guilty to possessing weapons such as tasers, knives, batons and knuckledusters.<sup>33</sup> Police did not allege that Azami intended to be part of the plot; instead they supported a defence application to keep him out of jail out of concern for his mental health and the risk of radicalisation. The remaining suspect, Harun Causevic, was initially charged as a co-conspirator in the terrorist plot but this was dropped due to lack of evidence. The Australian Federal Police (AFP) then sought a Control Order against him, which has a lower standard of proof (on the grounds of the balance of probabilities rather than beyond reasonable doubt). During the hearings, the judge was persuaded that Causevic was dangerous enough to justify a Control Order, but was not persuaded on the balance of probabilities that he had been part of the plot.<sup>34</sup> This leaves Sevdet Besim, the focus of this article, as the only proven participant within Australia.

Besim was eighteen years old when the plot was foiled. He was born in Melbourne in 1997, in a family that was not particularly observant of Islam. From 2012, he started attending the al-Furqan Islamic Centre in Springvale, along with some friends.<sup>35</sup> Al-Furqan has been described by a judge as "openly supportive of Islamic State", as having "regularly attracted individuals who believed in an extremist interpretation of Islam", and was run by an imam who had "been ostracised from the broader Islamic community in light

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<sup>32</sup> Sarah Farnsworth, 'Anzac Day Terror Plot: Melbourne Teen Sevdet Besim Pleads Guilty to Planning Act of Terrorism', *ABC News*, 30 June 2016. Joint Counter-Terrorism Teams exist in each state and include members from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, the Australian Federal Police, the relevant state police service, and sometimes other agencies.

<sup>33</sup> *R v Azami* [2015] VCC 1862 (15 December 2015), para. 3, <[www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/vic/VCC/2015/1862.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/vic/VCC/2015/1862.html)> [Accessed 13 November 2016].

<sup>34</sup> See *R v Azami*, para. 15; *Gaughan v Causevic* (No. 2) [2016] FCCA 1693 (8 July 2016), <[www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/FCCA/2016/1693.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/FCCA/2016/1693.html)> [Accessed 13 November 2016].

<sup>35</sup> *The Queen v Besim*, p. 7.

of his extreme views”.<sup>36</sup> In 2013 and 2014, Besim and his friends regularly attended al-Furqan and met new people. One person Besim met there was Neil Prakash, who travelled to Syria in 2013 and became one of Australia’s most infamous IS members.<sup>37</sup> Besim’s close friend Irfaan Husseini also joined IS, leaving Australia on 7 September 2014.<sup>38</sup> However, the initial catalyst for the plot was the death of one of Besim’s close friends, Numan Haider, that same month.

Understanding these events requires briefly turning to the Middle East. September 2014 was a tumultuous month in the region, in which the confrontation between IS and the US-led military coalition reached a new level. By this time, IS had been able to successfully exploit the chaos of Syria’s civil war and the fragility of Iraq (as the political settlement forged to contain the outbreak of violence after the 2003 US invasion started to collapse). By June 2014 IS had conquered swathes of land in Iraq, including the million-strong city of Mosul, and declared itself a “Caliphate”. By August they conquered more territory, seized the Kurdish city of Sinjar and perpetrated acts of genocide against its Yazidi population, and were poised to expand further.<sup>39</sup>

US President Barack Obama responded on 7 August by ordering airstrikes and assisting the Iraqi government and Kurdish Peshmerga to push back against IS. In reprisal, IS publicly murdered American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff. On 10 September, Obama announced a broad coalition including Australia and other traditional allies to “roll back this terrorist threat” and “ultimately destroy” IS.<sup>40</sup> Following this, IS escalated its overt and covert efforts to attack Western countries. On 22 September, IS spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani called for unrestrained violence against Americans and any allies:

So O Muslim, do not let this battle pass you by wherever you may be. You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the idol worshippers. Strike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents. Destroy their beds. Embitter their lives for them and busy them with themselves. If you can kill a disbelieving American or European—especially the spiteful and filthy French—or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the

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<sup>36</sup> Gaughan v Causevic, para. 39. The centre was also associated with counter-terrorism raids in 2012 following the reported bashing of an Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) informant. This led to one person being charged with a terrorism offence, but later acquitted. To get a sense of the views and activities of the person charged in 2012, while keeping in mind that this does not make him guilty of a crime, see *The Queen v Karabegovic* (Ruling No. 3) [2015] VSC 641 (17 November 2015), paras 47-170.

<sup>37</sup> *The Queen v Besim*, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Gaughan v Causevic, para. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Stephanie Nebehay, ‘Islamic State Committing Genocide Against Yazidis: U.N.’, *Reuters*, 16 June 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Barack Obama, ‘Statement by the President on ISIL’, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 10 September 2014, <[www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1)> [Accessed 19 November 2016].

citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then put your trust in Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's Fatwa. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers. Both of them are considered to be waging war...Blood becomes legal to spill through disbelief. So whoever is a Muslim, his blood and wealth are sanctified. And whoever is a disbeliever, his wealth is legal for a Muslim to take and his blood is legal to spill...The best thing you can do is to strive to your best and kill any disbeliever, whether he be French, American, or from any of their allies.<sup>41</sup>

Counter-terrorism authorities watched these developments with concern. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) monitored local IS supporters and urged the government to raise the National Terrorism Public Alert. On 12 September the alert was raised from Medium to High.<sup>42</sup> Then on 18 September security agencies launched Australia's largest ever series of counter-terrorism raids after intercepting a message from a Syria-based Australian IS member allegedly ordering supporters at home to murder a random member of the public. More than 800 federal and state police officers raided locations across Sydney and Brisbane to disrupt the suspected plot and its surrounding networks.<sup>43</sup>

Besim's small group of friends in Melbourne, particularly Numan Haider, had also come to the attention of counter-terrorism authorities. On 16 September, Haider learned that ASIO had refused his passport application, suspecting that he planned to join IS.<sup>44</sup> Over the next week he publicly expressed outrage at the passport refusal and at the counter-terrorism raids, yelling at police officers in a shopping centre, "you will pay for what happened in Brisbane and Sydney today".<sup>45</sup> After IS spokesman al-Adnani released his 22 September call for violence against citizens of the US-led coalition, Haider downloaded the call to arms and arranged to meet two Victorian JCTT officers in a carpark. The two officers arrived with the expectation that they would discuss his passport, but Haider brought two knives and a *shahada* (profession of faith) flag and attacked the JCTT officers. He stabbed both of them before being fatally shot.<sup>46</sup>

Catalysed by Haider's death, Besim gradually sought to take action himself. However, he did not go through this journey alone. Similar to many participants in IS attacks in Europe, Asia and elsewhere, he would be closely guided from abroad.

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<sup>41</sup> The Queen v Besim, pp. 43-44.

<sup>42</sup> The Hon. Tony Abbott MP and Senator the Hon. George Brandis QC, 'National Terrorism Public Alert Level Raised to High', Office of the Attorney-General for Australia, 12 September 2014, <[www.attorneygeneral.gov.au/Mediareleases/Pages/2014/ThirdQuarter/12September2014-NationalTerrorismPublicAlertLevelRaisedToHigh.aspx](http://www.attorneygeneral.gov.au/Mediareleases/Pages/2014/ThirdQuarter/12September2014-NationalTerrorismPublicAlertLevelRaisedToHigh.aspx)> [Accessed 19 November 2016].

<sup>43</sup> Stewart, 'The Order to Kill that Triggered Operation Appleby'.

<sup>44</sup> The Queen v Besim, p. 45.

<sup>45</sup> Gaughan v Causevic, para. 44.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., para. 44; The Queen v Besim, pp. 8-9, 44-45.

## The Anzac Plot's Virtual Planners

Besim's guidance first came from people he had known in Melbourne who were now fighting for IS in Syria. According to the evidence presented in Besim's sentencing hearings, Prakash contacted Besim through social media shortly after Haider's death and encouraged him to try to come to Syria.<sup>47</sup> Besim applied for a passport on 13 November, but was told the following month that it was refused.<sup>48</sup> He gradually concluded that if he was going to take action it would have to be in Australia. As the plans developed, Prakash gave Besim the contact details for a co-conspirator who, due to his age, is only publicly known as "S".<sup>49</sup>

"S" was a teenager in London who had come under the influence of IS in 2014. He had been experiencing a troubled life, with his parents separating, difficulty at school, and a degenerative eye condition that meant he was going blind. He took an interest in jihadism and reached out to extremist preachers such as Anjem Choudary and Mohammed Mizanur Rahman.<sup>50</sup> He was advised to open a Twitter account, and Prakash contacted him soon after.<sup>51</sup> According to evidence later presented in the UK sentencing hearings for "S", Prakash had mentored him, communicating daily for a period, and brought him into IS's online community where he became a jihadist celebrity.<sup>52</sup>

In early 2015, Prakash had told "S" of a "brother in Australia who wished to carry out a terrorist attack but needed a guide or mentor".<sup>53</sup> Shortly after, Besim contacted "S" through the encrypted messaging service Telegram and said he was the *mujahid* from Australia. "S" pretended to be an experienced jihadist with a wife and son, leaving Besim unaware that he was only fourteen years old.<sup>54</sup>

"S" first asked security questions, which were answered successfully.<sup>55</sup> In one of their next conversations, "S" advised Besim that he could travel to fight or attack at home. Besim responding by telling "S" that he could not

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<sup>47</sup> The Queen v Besim, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Nick Miller, 'The Boy Who Wanted to Spread Blood and Terror in the Anzac Day Parade', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October 2015; Nick Miller, 'Radical Clerics Found Guilty of Supporting IS Had Contact with Teenager Behind Terror Plot', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, 'The Boy Who Wanted to Spread Blood and Terror in the Anzac Day Parade'.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. There are few details on this process as no court material for "S" is currently available online, presumably because of his age. The process may have resembled that outlined at: J. M. Berger, 'Tailored Online Interventions: The Islamic State's Recruitment Strategy', *CTC Sentinel*, 25 October 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Miller, 'The Boy Who Wanted to Spread Blood and Terror in the Anzac Day Parade'.

<sup>54</sup> The Queen v Besim, pp. 17,19.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

travel and that he already had orders for an attack in Australia.<sup>56</sup> Over the next nine days, they communicated regularly through Telegram and together planned the attack.

While “S” became Besim’s main source of guidance for the plot, he was not the first or only one. Besim said that Prakash was going to give him names and addresses of Australian Army personnel who had served in Iraq, to kill in their homes, though this did not end up happening.<sup>57</sup> Besim also told “S” that Irfaan Hussein, the close friend of his fighting for IS, had been planning an attack for him since January and was meant to return to help.<sup>58</sup> However, he soon learnt that Hussein had died in Syria; by one account he was killed in battle with Kurdish forces, by another account he was executed by IS for trying to leave.<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, the court material indicates that two Australian IS fighters, Prakash and Hussein, initially guided Besim but eventually “S” became the key virtual planner. That a fourteen-year-old played this role is unusual, but their interaction resembled other virtually planned plots in the four key areas: targets, tactics, commitment, and publicity.

### **TARGETS**

At first, “S” took the initiative on suggesting targets. In an early conversation he promised to research targets in Melbourne and provide Besim with a task, and over the next conversations they discussed targets together.<sup>60</sup>

Though they viewed general members of the public as legitimate targets, they saw security officials as more valuable ones. Through their Telegram messages, Besim said *“I see the best way to do this is to attack australian authority because by attacking there authority it shows weakness it then means that the general population has less confidence in them and therefore is more scared alhumdulillah putting fear into these kufar”*.<sup>61</sup> He told “S” that the agencies he hated the most were the AFP, ASIO and state police.<sup>62</sup> While he had considered attacks on Army personnel, Prakash had not sent the list of names and addresses.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 12, 16-17. The sentencing document does not actually state that the friend’s name is Irfaan Hussein, but this can be clearly inferred by comparing it to the Causevic Control Order ruling. The Control Order ruling states that Besim messaged Causevic on or about 19 March 2015 to tell him that Irfaan Hussein had died in Syria, while Besim’s sentencing document shows that on the same day Besim was telling “S” that he had just found out his close friend had died in Syria. See: Gaughan v Causevic, para. 43.

<sup>59</sup> The Queen v Besim, pp. 14, 16-17; Sarah Dean, ‘Australian Jihadi Killed While “Trying to Flee” Syria and Return Home May Have Been Beheaded’, *Daily Mail Australia*, 19 May 2015.

<sup>60</sup> The Queen v Besim, p. 11.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.53. Italicised quotes are character-for-character recreations of the Telegram messages, as presented in the court material.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

Besim was more certain about the timing than the specific target, saying that an Anzac Day attack would “*Make sure the dogs remember this as well as there fallen ‘heros’*”.<sup>63</sup> He later added that “*this will mean they will remember this on that day every yr after insha’Allah*”, that “*Its close to the kufar heart coz they lost so many ppl*” and that “*The gov gives a speech on how they will always be remembered*”.<sup>64</sup> “S” agreed on the timing and helped Besim choose the target.

On several occasions, “S” responded to Besim’s target suggestions with questions to explore their suitability. For a police station, he warned that they would have procedures for an armed person approaching and that he could be shot before having a chance to kill anyone.<sup>65</sup> For a shopping centre, he advised that it should only be targeted if he already had a gun.<sup>66</sup> For the Anzac Day parade held at Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance, one of their most discussed targets, “S” asked if there was space for a car to run police over and asked for photos of the streets.<sup>67</sup> He also asked if it was possible for Besim to drive straight into the crowd and how many armed officers would likely be there.<sup>68</sup>

They made no final decision on the target. Though they repeatedly discussed attacking the Anzac Day parade held at the Shrine, which would be attended by tens of thousands of people, they did not firmly settle on it. Besim had searched online for information on the parade, and on other Anzac Day events like the Dandenong Dawn Service. Some of their targets (police stations, shopping centres and court houses) did not specifically involve Anzac commemorations, and they also discussed luring police officers into an ambush.<sup>69</sup> What mattered most was to kill one or more police officers on Anzac Day; the exact location depended on what the most feasible tactic was.

## TACTICS

The first tactical advice from “S” was about the importance of operational security. He advised Besim to act normally around his family and to start dressing like a “*kuffar*” (non-Muslim).<sup>70</sup> For the day of the attack, “S” advised him to wear black clothes and a scarf, and to smash and burn his phone.<sup>71</sup> “S” also advised him to act alone and not trust anybody, though it became clear that Besim had told other people.<sup>72</sup> At one point “S” asked how many

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 62-63.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp. 56-57.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-52, 55.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

others knew of the attack; Besim answered “No one really, theres jst a few brothers that know i want to do somthing they dnt know dates or specifics about the op”.<sup>73</sup>

To carry out the operation, “S” initially advised Besim to sell his car and buy a firearm, but Besim struggled to find where to buy one. He said Irfaan Hussein would provide him with a low-calibre weapon when he returned from Syria, for which “S” provided advice, such as that it could be best used for close-range shots to the back of the head.<sup>74</sup> However, on 19 March Besim learnt of Hussein’s death which ruled out one way to get a gun.<sup>75</sup> He later spoke of another “brother” who could get him a gun but who was opposed to the “op”.<sup>76</sup> Besim also claimed that a handgun was buried in his garden and that he would recover it while his family was at a wedding, but this does not appear to have happened.<sup>77</sup>

Failing that, “S” and Besim decided the best approach was to steal a gun from a police officer as *ghanimah* (spoils of war). They settled on a plan for Besim to drive over a police officer, behead them, steal their gun, and start shooting until he was himself killed. “S” gave advice on this, such as instructing Besim to attach a *shahada* flag to his car, so that no one could doubt the attack’s purpose.<sup>78</sup> “S” also suggested what knives would be “perfect for tearing through throat”<sup>79</sup> and that Besim should practice beheading a “proper lonely person”.<sup>80</sup>

However, Besim rejected the suggestion of a practice beheading. He also rejected some other suggestions from “S”, such as taking photos of the streets where the Anzac parade was to be held, which he said would be too suspicious.<sup>81</sup> So “S” did not dictate the tactics and often deferred to Besim’s local knowledge, but he did act as if it was his position to give orders. In one of their last conversations, Besim asked “So far the plan is to run a cop over or the anzac parade & then continue to kill a cop then take *ghanimah* and run to *shahadah*?”. “S” answered “*Bidhnillah ill give orders soon but its looking along that line akhi*”.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 63-64.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 12, 19.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>80</sup> Mark Russell, ‘Judge Releases Alleged Communications Between Teenage Terror Suspect Sevdet Besim and 14-Year-Old UK Boy Over Anzac Day Plot’, *The Age*, 3 June 2015; *The Queen v Besim*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>81</sup> *The Queen v Besim*, p. 17.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

## COMMITMENT

On their first day of contact, “S” reminded Besim to maintain his commitment and suggested he run every day and recite the Koran to remain steadfast.<sup>83</sup> “S” provided further encouragement as the plot came closer to fruition, and helped to assuage any doubts. When Besim asked “*If I kill a civilian from any countrys of coalition im i guilty of sin*”, he answered “*No, because these ppl r supporting and assisting the killing of muslims*”.<sup>84</sup> On other occasions he reminded Besim of the heavenly rewards waiting for him, and that on Judgement Day they could stand before God and show their battle scars.<sup>85</sup> He also claimed that his “wife” was wishing the plot well and that his “son” was similarly preparing for an attack in London.<sup>86</sup>

However, on 25 March, “S” was arrested by UK police. He was quickly released on bail, and Tweeted “[A]nyone who has me on Telegram immediately self-destruct, police have my phone”.<sup>87</sup> Besim nonetheless continued his preparations for the attack up until his arrest on 18 April, a week before Anzac Day, showing that encouragement from “S” was not necessarily indispensable for him to maintain commitment.

## PUBLICITY

To generate the desired publicity, “S” had instructed Besim that he would need to send a martyrdom video with a *bay’ah* (pledge of allegiance) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and an explanation for the attack.<sup>88</sup> Besim said he had already made such a video but that a friend had deleted it.<sup>89</sup> Besim told “S” he would make a new one when his family was at the wedding, and asked “S” for a list of what to include. Besim also asked if he could send the video through Prakash as he thought it would be more secure, suggesting that Prakash may have still been playing a role, but in the background.<sup>90</sup>

It is unclear whether Besim ended up making the video. However, he did write a martyrdom statement on his phone, which he continued to edit up until his arrest.<sup>91</sup> In the statement, he tied IS’s global message into his personal story:

*A while ago world leaders declared war on Islam and Muslims, invading lands, dividing us into separate nations, installing puppets, killing and torturing Muslims. This war had always had a impact on me, however recently my brother Numan (May Allah accept him) carried out his attack, this opened my eyes up to the reality of who the enemy is. Since then a*

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>84</sup> Miller, ‘The Boy Who Wanted to Spread Blood and Terror in the Anzac Day Parade’.

<sup>85</sup> The Queen v Besim, p. 14.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp. 17, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-26.

*growing feeling within me had led me to decide to carry out my own. To establish my jihad in Australia, to fight the oppressors, those who have implemented man made law, to fight to make Allahs word known and the highest, to defend Islam and put fear into those who are enemies to Allah and his religion Insha'Allah. At first I wanted nothing else but to leave this country and live in the Islamic State, however after many complications with my passport I realised this could not be done. So I started to prepare my self for my attack against the enemies of Islam...*<sup>92</sup>

As it happened, Besim never carried out the attack. Two weeks after UK police arrested “S”, they managed to decrypt the Telegram messages between him and Besim.<sup>93</sup> With the plot uncovered, the Victorian JCTT swooped on Besim and other suspects on 18 April. Besim was charged with a terrorism offence on 21 April, ultimately leading to his guilty plea and prison sentence. With the plot foiled, there would be no *al-Amaq* video announcing Besim’s attack and martyrdom on behalf of IS.

However, on 22 April IS did release a video making Neil Prakash widely known to the public. In the video, Prakash called for attacks in Australia and announced that he had personally known Numan Haider.<sup>94</sup> A year later, a US airstrike injured Prakash and he was wrongly reported dead, but was later arrested in Turkey. Following his misreported death, the federal government described him as “actively involved both in recruitment and in encouraging domestic terrorist events... he was the principal Australian reaching back from the Middle East into Australia, and in particular, to terrorist networks in both Melbourne and Sydney”.<sup>95</sup>

## **Implications**

This case study shows that the 2015 Anzac Day terror plot was one of IS’s virtually planned attacks. Besim did not act alone, but was guided by regular contact with IS figures based abroad, who advised on choosing targets, making tactical preparations, maintaining commitment, and ensuring publicity. This is not unique to the Anzac plot, but represents a significant part of the increased terror threat Australia has faced since September 2014. As noted earlier, at least two other recent proven terror plots in Australia have evidence of IS virtual planning, and some of the alleged plots yet to go through court show indications of virtual planning. Therefore, this operational method has been utilised multiple times to try to attack Australia.

A key reason for this would be that centrally planned IS plots are less feasible in Australia than they were in countries like France and Belgium. IS had established a sophisticated underground infrastructure in Europe,

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>93</sup> Miller, ‘The Boy Who Wanted to Spread Blood and Terror in the Anzac Day Parade’.

<sup>94</sup> Marissa Calligeros, ‘Islamic State Recruiter Neil Prakash Calls for Attacks in Australia in Propaganda Video’, *The Age*, 22 April 2015.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Safi and Paul Karp, ‘Neil Prakash, Most Senior Australian Fighting with Isis, Killed in Iraq Airstrike’, *The Guardian*, 5 May 2016.

enabled by various factors: Europe produced many more foreign fighters, had more porous borders, was geographically closer, and had greater strategic importance. Virtually planned plots provide a way for IS to attack Australia without having to attempt the sort of ambitious and closely controlled plans they carried out in Paris and Brussels. It also allows them to not rely solely on inspired individuals acting on their own initiative. Given that IS has successfully used virtual planning to launch attacks in Europe, Asia and elsewhere, it is unsurprising that Australia has also experienced multiple virtually planned plots.

The Anzac plot also demonstrates some of the practical implications of the differences between these types of attacks and centrally planned ones. For example, the interactions between “S” and Besim show that the relationship between virtual planner and perpetrator is not one of strict command and control, as Besim had little trouble rejecting impractical advice. “S” dictated neither the timing nor the tactics and often deferred to Besim’s local knowledge. In addition, Besim’s difficulty getting a gun highlights that this virtual method does not allow IS to provide direct logistical support. There have been cases elsewhere (mainly in France and India) where virtual planners helped to coordinate logistics remotely, such as by instructing another person in-country to leave a bag of weapons in a particular location.<sup>96</sup> However, these cases currently appear to be rare, so the lack of logistical support provides another way that the Anzac plot resembles most other IS virtual plots.

However, one feature makes the Anzac plot distinct and requires further exploring. Besim’s guidance initially came from Syria-based IS fighters, similar to the plots examined by Barr, Blackman, Gartenstein-Ross, Joscelyn, Moreng and others. However, his main guidance in the plot’s latter stage came from a UK-based juvenile, which is unusual for two reasons. The first is his location, being neither in IS territory nor the country being attacked. Virtual planning enables this, because while “most of ISIL’s prominent virtual planners appear to be based in the group’s ‘caliphate’ in Syria and Iraq, ... since the main equipment that virtual planners require is an Internet connection and good encryption, they could theoretically operate from other geographic locations”.<sup>97</sup>

The second reason that the involvement of “S” is unusual is that he was fourteen years old; it is rare for children to play such a significant planning role. Given his young age, it has to be wondered whether “S” fully grasped the seriousness of what he was advising on. But even if he did not, it unfortunately does not remove the threat from such plans. Virtual planning is an operational method which lowers the barriers to entry, meaning that

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<sup>96</sup> Callimachi, ‘Not “Lone Wolves” After All’.

<sup>97</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman, ‘ISIL’s Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation’.

people with varying degrees of genuine commitment, sometimes juveniles and fantasists, can become dangerously real participants in terror plots.

This is less likely to happen with centrally planned plots where leaders can select personnel carefully and might not trust someone this young with operational responsibility, or with “lone wolf” plots where someone like “S” would have to take action himself.<sup>98</sup> Such participants may or may not entirely grasp what they are doing, but their guidance can still be dangerous. Whether or not it seems truly real to them as they dispense violent advice, the aspiring martyr at the other end may treat their words with deadly seriousness.

This dynamic is likely to have played out in some other virtually planned plots. For example, the Mother’s Day 2015 plot also appears to have had a fantasist element. According to the limited information currently available, while the teenager was communicating with Syria-based British IS member Junaid Hussein, he was also, like Besim, communicating with a Western-based figure who was not what he seemed. This was “Australi Witness”, who turned out to be a Jewish-American who, for entirely unclear motives, adopted a number of online personas, one of which was as an Australian jihadist while others included a neo-Nazi and a radical feminist.<sup>99</sup> It is plausible that some other virtually planned plots have similarly seen juveniles or fantasists play planning roles, or may in the future. Therefore, the Anzac plot not only serves as an example of how Islamic State virtual planning occurred in Australia, but demonstrates a distinct feature likely relevant to virtually planned plots elsewhere.

## **Conclusion**

The 2015 Anzac Day terror plot developed as a result of IS’s operational method of *virtual planning*. Besim was first guided by two Syria-based IS fighters who he had known in Melbourne beforehand and then by “S”. The plot bore strong resemblances to other virtually planned IS terror plots across the world, in that these virtual planners, primarily “S” in the plot’s later stages, assisted Besim to explore targets, advised on tactics, encouraged him to remain committed, and helped to ensure that the attack could be publicised by IS if carried out. The advice helped Besim progress towards the attack but did not overcome logistical limitations, such as his difficulty finding a firearm. This too resembles other such plots, as IS has only rarely been able to remotely orchestrate logistic support for its virtually planned attacks.

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<sup>98</sup> However, the murder of NSW Police accountant Curtis Cheng by a fifteen-year-old jihadist demonstrates that on some rare occasions children will take such direct action, although the perpetrator was not a “lone wolf”.

<sup>99</sup> Padraic Murphy, ‘Teenager Pleads Guilty to Planning Mother’s Day Terrorist Attack in Melbourne’, *Herald Sun*, 14 December 2015.

However, one of the plot's distinctive features was that "S" was not an IS fighter operating out of Raqqa but was just a UK-based juvenile. It may seem unusual for a fourteen-year-old to play an important role in a transcontinental terror plot, but virtual planning can enable that by lowering the barriers to involvement. This operational method makes it easier for something that might have begun as a fantasy to turn into a dangerous reality.

Overall, the concept of virtual planning helps make sense of the terror threat Australia faces. At least three other recent plots in the country appear to have followed this operational method. The concept is also relevant to the wider region, with both Indonesia and Malaysia having experienced such plots.<sup>100</sup> Virtual planning is likely to become even more important as IS continues to lose territory in Iraq and Syria.<sup>101</sup> The group is anticipated to escalate its external violence in response, and is unlikely to soon abandon an approach that has helped them guide attacks in places where they otherwise lacked the capability.<sup>102</sup>

*Andrew Zammit is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship, and has worked on terrorism research projects at Monash University and Victoria University. He blogs at [andrewzammit.org](http://andrewzammit.org) and co-produces the podcast *Sub Rosa* on security and human rights issues in Australia and Southeast Asia. [zammita@student.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:zammita@student.unimelb.edu.au).*

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<sup>100</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, 'Bloody Ramadan'.

<sup>101</sup> Andrew Watkins, 'Losing Territory and Lashing Out: The Islamic State and International Terror', *CTC Sentinel*, 17 March 2016.

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