

New Zealand's jihadis

Aaron Zelin discusses the problem New Zealand faces in dealing with Muslim radicalisation and the danger of participation by its citizens in foreign conflicts.

Unlike many other Western countries and its neighbour Australia, New Zealand historically has not had an issue with members of its Muslim population joining up with Sunni global jihadi groups abroad or sympathising with them at home. It is true that comparatively there still are not that many of these types of individuals in New Zealand, but with the unprecedented number of foreign fighters going to Syria and the rise of the Islamic State, there has been some New Zealand travel to Syria and support in its homeland. This should not lead to an alarmist interpretation, but rather provides an opportunity to illustrate what types of trends are occurring to better situate what is happening within the broader global jihadi milieu and how Kiwi jihadis fit into it. To get at this, this article will first provide background on the Syrian war and the Islamic State, then briefly discuss the historically extremely low rate of New Zealanders joining up with global jihadi organisations; afterwards it will highlight cases of individuals going to Syria as well as the rise in homegrown sympathisers, and lastly discuss how the New Zealand government has responded to this issue.

When the uprising in Syria first broke out in March 2011, like in other countries that saw outbreaks of peaceful protests in the region, jihadists, most specifically al-Qaeda, were flat-footed in their response. Al-Qaeda in Pakistan did not even put out a country-specific statement or video on Syria until February 2012. Although Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) was not officially announced until late January 2012, evidence suggests that it was originally established in the northern summer of 2011. Abu Lokman, a senior JN commander in Aleppo, explained to the BBC in January 2013 that he originally joined the group in its infancy six months prior to its first public video release. This would place JN's founding at the end of July 2011 — a timeframe corroborated in interviews with other JN fighters who have spoken with Western and Arab media outlets.

Abu Lokman's date also coincides with Zawahiri's first video related to the Syrian uprising, released on 27 July 2011. In it, he supported the 'Muslims in Bilad al-Sham, the land of *ribat*, jihad, glory, Arabism, and nobility'. In the context of his latest announcement on Syria, this suggests that al-Qaeda Central had knowledge of — and perhaps even ordered — JN's establishment. In late summer 2011, al-Qaeda's affiliate at the time the Islamic



Mosul — home of the Islamic State of Iraq

State of Iraq leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi dispatched operatives to Syria to set up JN. Among them was Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, the leader of what would become JN, which officially announced itself in late January 2012. By November 2012, Jawlani had built JN into one of the opposition's best fighting forces, and locals viewed its members as fair arbiters when dealing with corruption and social services.



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Due to these successes, Baghdadi changed the name of his group from ISI to ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) in April 2013. He likely believed that it was acceptable to publicly announce what was already known: that JN and ISI were one and the same. Yet this did not sit well with Jawlani — he rebuffed the change and reaffirmed his allegiance to AQC chief Zawahiri, who later tried (and failed) to nullify Baghdadi's power play. Amid the confusion, many Syrian jihadis left JN for ISIS, while Baghdadi himself moved from Iraq and established a base in Syria, according to the State Department. ISIS also began to attract a growing number of foreign fighters.

Deadly rift

Therefore, contrary to the media narrative that JN merged with ISIS, the two groups actually separated. Things would only get worse over time. On the evening of 2 February 2014, al-Qaeda's general command released a statement disavowing itself from ISIS: 'ISIS is not a branch of the Qaidat al-Jihad [al-Qaeda's official name] group, we have no organizational relationship with it,

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Rena and Sami David fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. He is also founder of the widely cited website Jihadology.net and a PhD candidate at King's College London.

Unlike other Western nations New Zealand, historically, has not had an issue with its Muslim citizens going abroad and joining up in foreign conflicts with Sunni global jihadi groups or with homegrown activism. While the rate of participation remains comparatively low, as a result of the unprecedented flow of foreign fighters to and growth in the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq there are signs that some within New Zealand have been drawn to the fighting or are sympathetic with what is going on. The civil war in Syria has been instrumental in encouraging such involvement.

and the group is not responsible for its actions.' The rift between al-Qaeda/JN and ISIS at first consisted mainly of sniping between leaders, but turned deadly after that with internecine fighting occurring over the following few months until each group carved out a particular piece of territory.

Then in June 2014, after taking over Mosul and other areas in western Iraq, ISIS announced that it had re-established the Caliphate and was now just calling itself The Islamic State. The takeover of Mosul also supplied the Islamic State with new weapons when it overran Iraqi security forces, which allowed it to then pour these new resources into the Syrian conflict, helping it take more territory in Syria and consolidate its strength in eastern Syria. As a result of all of this, as well as the public beheadings of American and British journalists and humanitarian workers, since the fall of 2014 there has been an active air campaign by the United States, other Western countries and US Arab allies and others against the Islamic State, a campaign which as of January 2015 has had mixed results.

Unprecedented influx

As a result of this growth in jihadi organisations inside of Syria there has been an unprecedented influx of foreign fighters over the past three years. There are eight main factors that have contributed to why the Syrian conflict in particular has been able to sway such a large number of individuals to join the fight:

- **Ease of travel:** Unlike past foreign fighter mobilisations, it is relatively easy to get to Syria. Most individuals fly or drive from their locations to Turkey and then to Syria. Compared with Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia or Mali, going to Turkey also does not necessarily raise any red flags since it is a huge tourist destination. Flights to Turkey — at least from Europe — are incredibly cheap and most countries have visa waiver deals with the Turkish government. This makes it easier, especially for those who might not be willing to risk going to more isolated locations.
- **Existence of seasoned grassroots support networks:** In comparison with the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, today's foreign fighter networks are not starting from scratch. Rather, they are building off past efforts and tapping into local grassroots movements and organisations already established. For example, in Western Europe there is al-Muhajirun in Britain, Sharia4Belgium in Belgium, Forsane Alizza in France and Milla-tu Ibrahim in Germany to name a few. Also in North Africa, there is the Ansar al-Sharia network in Libya and Tunisia.
- **Social media facilitation:** In many respects, Syria is the first large-scale socially mediated war. Unlike in the past when individuals had to go out and seek the password-protected jihadi forums to get information about the groups and ideologies and discuss things among peers of online jihadi activists, it is a lot easier to access Twitter and Facebook. One does not necessarily need to seek out these sites since they are relatively open systems online and, in the case of Twitter, groups can target certain audiences through hashtags, potentially exposing those who might not have been exposed previously to the ideas and plans of the global jihadi movement. Unintentionally, both Twitter and Facebook provide recommendations for other liked-minded individuals to 'follow' or 'friend', making such groups relatively easy to find through their algorithms.
- **Emotional resonance of the 'cause':** A major motivating factor

for many foreign fighters is the reaction to the over-the-top brutality and massacres the Assad regime has repeatedly perpetrated against the majority Sunni Muslim Syrian population. It also does not help that the Assad regime is Alawite and is viewed as a heretical sect within Islam. The movement is being assisted by the Shi'a Iranian government and non-state actors Lebanese Hezbollah and a number of Iraqi Shi'a militiamen. Additionally, widely disseminated images of brutality evoke visceral emotions to provide help, especially when added to the fact that overt response to the tragedy — whether by Western governments or Arab regimes — is limited. Many feel it is a duty upon themselves in solidarity with their fellow Sunni Muslim brothers and sisters in Syria to help out and fight the Assad regime.

- **Five-star jihad appeal:** To many, the Syrian jihad is viewed as a 'cool' and easy place to go and participate when compared with the mountains or deserts of Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia or Mali. In Syria, for example, many foreigners have lived in villas with pools and ones that have a video game room.
- **Religious-historical and millenarian pull:** The fact that the seat of the Caliphate was once based in Damascus provides a strong motivation for those who hope once again that the Caliphate will be resurrected. Additionally, Islamic eschatology on the end of times prophecies loom large since the key battles are located in the Levant, with some of the foreign fighters believing they are bringing about the day of judgment. It should also be noted that Jabhat al-Nusra's media outlet is named al-Manara al-Bayda (the White Minaret). This is in reference to the minaret at the Grand Mosque in Damascus that Jesus is allegedly supposed to descend from to then take on the *dajjal* (the false messiah) to hasten God's judgment.
- **Anti-Shi'a sentiment:** Such sentiment has become more prevalent as the conflict has evolved due to two key dynamics: first, the assistance by the Shi'a foreign contingent of Iran's IRGC, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi militiamen to the Assad regime. The second factor is the radicalisation of many fighting forces within the rebel ranks into Salafism, which is anti-Shi'a from the basics of its doctrine.
- **Caliphate project:** Since the Islamic State announced itself as a Caliphate in June 2014, it has been able to recruit a wider diversity of individuals. Part of this is because it is now interested in a state-building project, which needs more than just fighters. As a result, in its messaging it has called for administrators, doctors, engineers, computer scientists and graphic designers, among others, to help build up its proto-state. As a result, this has widened the potential pool of recruits since those that might have been apprehensive about being fighters and were fine with being online grassroots activists and cheerleaders now felt that they had a role. Moreover, because this was about creating a state and putting down roots it also encouraged families and individuals that had girlfriends or wives to join up and as a result altered what it necessarily meant to be a foreign fighter, since not all of these individuals were fighting at all, but rather taking part in the daily maintenance and life of society within the Islamic State's territory.

Small issue

Before getting into the history and current involvement of New Zealand Muslims in Sunni global jihadism, it is worth highlighting how small the issue is relative to other Western countries.

Currently, there are only about 40,000 Muslims living in New Zealand with about 25,000 of them in Auckland. Historically, New Zealand's Muslim community has its roots in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Fiji, but more recently has included immigrants from Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran, Somalia, Afghanistan and the Balkans.¹ Just to place the Muslim population's size in context in comparison with other Western nations that have had large foreign fighter mobilisations as well as blowback that has resulted in a terrorist attack against that particular country's homeland, there are 4.7 million Muslims in France, 4.1 million in Germany, 2.8 million in Britain, 1 million in Spain, 940,000 in Canada, 640,000 in Belgium and 400,000 in Australia. As a result, the small relative size in New Zealand highlights the relative lack of comparative threat, but while the numbers are lower cases like Muhammad Merah in Toulouse highlight the fact that it does not take many to cause havoc. Therefore, the issue should still be taken seriously even if there are probably only a small number of sympathisers within New Zealand.

Prior to the Syrian conflict, there had only been evidence that two New Zealanders had ever tried to link up with jihadis abroad. One of them, Mark John Taylor, also known as Mark John al-Rahman and Abu Abdul-Rahman, was arrested in Pakistan at an al-Qaeda stronghold in 2009. Later, Taylor went to Yemen and tried joining up with a fellow New Zealander and an Australian who had been members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). There is not a lot of publicly available information on what Taylor did while he was in Yemen, but the two individuals he sought to meet were later killed in American drone strikes in 2013 against AQAP. These individuals were Daryl Jones, a dual Australian–New Zealand national who went by Muslim Bin John, and his friend the Australian Christopher Havard. The two of them met while they were attending a Christchurch mosque. Havard's parents believe that is where their son was radicalised, though the imam there disputes that, suggesting it was more of a peer-to-peer and online radicalisation.² But, as will be seen below, there is a radical milieu that is currently based in Christchurch.

In terms of the current conflict in Syria, based on publicly available data 6–9 New Zealanders have tried to go or made it to Syria. According to the academic Timothy Holman, extrapolations based on relative population sizes suggest that there could be up to 57 individuals from New Zealand involved.³ Of those who are known, Mark John Taylor is currently in Syria, adding his third country of travel to his resume of jihadism. He is the only one that can be confirmed as currently still overseas. It is believed that Taylor arrived in Syria in June 2014, even though he was on a restricted travel list issued by the New Zealand government. Following his arrival he posted on his Facebook page his burnt New Zealand passport, stating that he was 'on a one-way trip' and did not plan to return home.⁴ Because of an error on his own part — tweeting under the handle @M_Taylor_Kiwi with his locations services on — Taylor's location from October–December 2014 was known

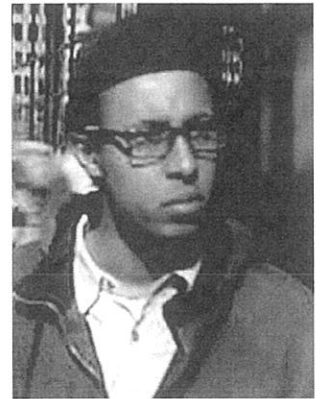
Mark John Taylor



to be Mara'at Nu'man in Idlib governorate and later al-Tabqah in al-Raqqa governorate.⁵ After this was leaked online, a clearly annoyed Taylor tweeted defiantly: 'Come and get me! I'm in the heart of ISIS Territory! What can you do to me NOTHING!'⁶ Moreover, on 7 December 2014, echoing the calls of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Taylor called on New Zealanders 'to come Home to a new Islamic state. We need Doctors, Dentists, Electronic Engineers, Telecommunications, civil etc.'⁷ He has since taken his Twitter account down.

Other individuals

In terms of the other individuals, Amin Mohamed was arrested in Australia while trying to get to Syria. He was believed to be in contact with two other New Zealanders that he had been recruiting to go to Syria as well, though their identities are unknown to the public.⁸ Additionally, there is Weiming Chen, a Chinese naturalised New Zealand citizen, who fought in Syria, but is believed to be in the United States as of June 2014 after leaving Syria.⁹ There have also been three individuals that have had their passports confiscated before they were able to make it to the war zone.¹⁰ Lastly, New Zealand Prime Minister John Key hinted that there might be a New Zealander who died while fighting in Syria, but this has not been confirmed, nor have there been further details released publicly.¹¹ Beyond that, the New Zealand state currently has 30–40 individuals on its watchlist, while 40 more need investigation, according to Key.¹²



Amin Mohamed

In addition to individuals that have gone or have tried to go abroad to Syria, there is the issue of homegrown support networks within New Zealand itself. This is relevant because we have seen the growth in localised milieus in many other Western countries that have become incubators for recruitment to foreign conflicts abroad, funding terrorist organisations and individuals that become inspired to plot an attack against the country they are living in. Therefore, although such entities might not be actively violent, the trend is worth watching. The prime example of this has been the al-Muhajirun network in England and its branches in France (Forsane Alizza), Germany (Millatu Ibrahim), Belgium (Sharia4Belgium), the Netherlands (Sharia4Holland) and Denmark (Kalidet til Islam), among others. Many of these networks have lain behind some of the most notorious individuals who have gone to Syria or been involved in plotting attacks back home.

One of these milieus is based around the Muslim preacher Abu Abdulla (Mohamed Abu Hamam), 50, who preaches at the Blockhouse Bay Road Mosque in Auckland. He was originally a surgeon from an Egyptian background, who moved to New Zealand in 1998 and currently lives off

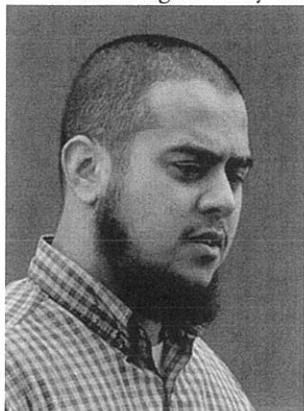
Abu Abdulla



state benefits and refuses to be employed. It is alleged that he previously spent time and fought in Afghanistan. Additionally, he was named in a US Embassy warning in 2005. Due to his radical views, the New Zealand Muslim Association (NZMA) banned him from mosques in Avondale, Ponsonby, Ranui and Birkenhead. His supporters have intimidated and beaten up other Muslim imams and individuals, including Haider Lone, a senior member of NZMA, who was in the hospital for ten days. Further, his son Abdullah Hamam is charged with threatening to kill members of the NZMA. Another follower, Imran Patel, has also been charged with threatening to kill and had his passport cancelled. Patel once stated:

We are peaceful, but we will attack when we are attacked. The whole world now will be engulfed in flames sooner or later because you cannot attack people... for too long and they are going to do nothing about it.¹³

This type of rhetoric has been seen from preachers like Anjem Choudary, the head of al-Muhajirun in England. Similar to Choudary, Abdulla has also discouraged followers from raising the New Zealand flag, declaiming it as *haram* (sinful) because it has the St George Cross on it: 'Do not be infidels by carrying or waving New Zealand flags to support the All Blacks.' Moreover, two of the three individuals mentioned above who had their passports cancelled had been followers of Abdulla.¹⁴



Imran Patel

Hastings focus

Another area that could see future activism is Hastings. Te Amorangi Kireka-Whaanga, 40, converted to Islam from his Mormon faith at the age of 22. He is now the head of the Aotearoa Maori Muslim Association, which has 150 members. In November 2014, he pledged support to the Islamic State and said that he wanted to travel with his family to Syria, where one of his 'brothers' (likely not a blood relative, but a brother in religion) already lived. As in Auckland there has been local pushback. There are 2000 Muslims in the Hawke's Bay region. His ex-wife Jameela Hawkin explained that 'there are a lot of really upset members of the Hawke's Bay Muslim community'. Further, Kireka-Whaanga has been pushing his ideas on his Facebook page, which has more than 900 'friends'.¹⁵ Unlike Abdulla above, there has not been any signs of aggression or violence, or of individuals attempting to go abroad amongst his followers, but the fact that he has given support to the Islamic State raises a lot of questions about what could happen in the future, especially since in September 2014 the Islamic State's official spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani called for lone wolf attacks in Western homelands.



Te Amorangi Kireka-Whaanga

The last potential hotspot is in Christchurch. This is also where Daryl Jones and the Australian Christopher Havard met and were radicalised last decade. According to Aaron Tahuu (Yusif Haroon Mik'eal), 33, who converted to Islam two years ago, there are allegedly a dozen Islamic State supporters in Christchurch, including himself. Tahuu is also a member of Aotearoa Maori Muslim Association, illustrating Kireka-Whaanga's reach beyond Hawke's Bay. A quote from Tahuu highlights some of the challenges involved in dealing with some of these individuals:

I can't stay in a country that's going to be fighting my religion [in reference to New Zealand joining the American coalition against the Islamic State]. If my country is going to make me an enemy of my country then I have no choice but to go and move to the Islamic State where I will be welcomed as a citizen... and not be persecuted for my religion or my beliefs.¹⁶

As we have seen in the past from other Western Muslims, such sentiments can lead to violence back at home. That is not to say that Tahuu or others will necessarily turn to violence, but understanding these potential signs is crucial for understanding the environment that currently permeates the most radical milieus within the New Zealand Muslim population.

State response

As a result of all of this, the New Zealand state has attempted to combat any potential threats to its homeland. Since at least late 2013, the state has been aware of individuals being involved in foreign fighting and activism at home.¹⁷ For the first time, though, in early November 2014, Prime Minister Key laid out a plan for how the state was going to pursue the issue. In a speech to the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, he proposed five major prongs:

- reforming its terrorism laws, specifically closing current travel loopholes as well as confiscating passports;
- stepping up intelligence sharing/operations within Five Eyes;
- using New Zealand's role in United Nations Security Council over next two years to diplomatically pursue resolutions to issues like the Iran nuclear negotiations or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which could alleviate tensions elsewhere;
- partnering with regional actors: Indonesia, Malaysia and others; and
- further humanitarian help as well as capacity-building of the new Iraqi government (policing, courts, and parliamentary process).¹⁸

With anything related to issues of terrorism it is very difficult to predict if or when something might happen. Since the threat remains low in New Zealand, individuals should not take maximalist positions on these issues. That said, there are more identifiable individuals involved with foreign fighter and home-grown activism than there has been in the past. The chance of something happening in New Zealand is likely small, but the fact that there are now individuals within these milieus highlights that those in power should take the problem seriously and at least be prepared for the worst. The question now is, will the number of individuals that are sympathetic to the Islamic State or global jihadism in general remain small? Or will the base grow? If it does, this issue will probably become more serious in the years ahead. For the time being, it is sufficient to identify current cases and trends, thereby allowing people a better understanding of possible outcomes.

NOTES

1. www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10335925
2. www.stuff.co.nz/national/10120347/Drone-victims-radicalised-at-mosque; www.stuff.co.nz/national/10118134/Killed-terrorists-radicalised-in-Christchurch; www.stuff.co.nz/national/10125382/Yemeni-drone-victim-had-escaped-to-Chch
3. acrossthegreenmountain.wordpress.com/2014/10/07/i-see-red-guesstimating-the-number-of-new-zealand-foreign-fighters-and-potential-travellers/
4. www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11296315
5. www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/01/new-zealand-syria-isis-accidentally-tweets-locations; ibrabo.wordpress.com/2014/12/30/new-zealand-jihadist-deletes-tweets-after-discovering-he-left-geotagging-on/
6. twitter.com/M_Taylor_Kiwi/status/550364844520534017
7. twitter.com/M_Taylor_Kiwi/status/541660407052906497
8. www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/no-turning-back-once-in-syria-wannabe-jihadi-amin-mohamed-told/story-e6frg6nf-1227077691269
9. www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/246892/nz-man-safe-in-us-from-syria; www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42944&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=228&cHash=193a0c541fafd2322939bd5e863e062a#.VMUcHWR4pwZ
10. www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/10137388/Govt-withholding-the-truth-on-Kiwi-fighters
11. www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/246892/nz-man-safe-in-us-from-syria
12. www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/speech-nz-institute-international-affairs-0
13. www.stuff.co.nz/national/10606918/Fears-of-terror-in-our-own-backyard
14. www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11260760; www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11257805
15. www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11352299
16. www.stuff.co.nz/national/10718902/Aotearoa-Muslim-is-proud-to-support-Isis
17. www.3news.co.nz/nznews/kiwis-fighting-in-syria-may-pose-terrorism-threat-2013120517#axzz3PqtIVru8
18. John Key, 'Facing a changing security environment', in *NZ International Review*, vol 40, no 1 (2015), pp.2-5. 



JOIN A BRANCH OF THE NZ INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The New Zealand Institute of International Affairs is a non-partisan, non-profit fitmaking organisation which aims to promote increased understanding of international affairs especially as they affect New Zealand. Each branch arranges its own programme of meetings and seminars on international affairs each year, often addressed by prominent overseas visitors. The annual branch subscription entitles members to attend these events, as well as to receive current issues of the NZIR. Additionally, other NZIIA publications may be obtained at favourable rates. To join, contact the appropriate branch below:

Auckland: Treasurer, Auckland Branch NZIIA, Dept of Politics, University of Auckland, Private Bag, Auckland 1142. Rates: \$50 (ordinary), \$40 (student)

Christchurch: Treasurer, Christchurch Branch NZIIA, Margaret Sweet, 29B Hamilton Avenue, Fendalton, Christchurch 8041. Rates: \$60 (couples), \$55 (individuals), \$30 (student)

Hamilton: Treasurer, Hamilton Branch NZIIA, c/- Politics Department, University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton. 3240. Rates: \$40 (ordinary), \$30 (student/retired)

Hawke's Bay: Contact: Dick Grant, 73 McHardy St, Havelock North 4130. Email: hbnziia@gmail.com
Rate: \$50 (ordinary)

Nelson: Hugo Judd, 48 Westlake Rd, RDI, Richmond, Nelson 7081. Rates \$50 (individual/couple), \$20 (student)

Palmerston North: Contact: Dr James To, International Pacific College, Private Bag 11021, Palmerston North 4442. Rates: \$40 (ordinary), \$35 (student)

Tauranga: Contact: Jen.Scoular. Email: jen.scoular@nzavocado.co.nz. Rates: \$55 (individual/family), \$45 (unwaged/retired/student)

Timaru: Contact: Rosemary Carruthers, PO Box 628, Timaru 7940. Email: carruthers_law@farmside.co.nz
Rates: \$40 (single), \$45 (family)

Wairarapa: Secretary, Aileen J. Weston, 152 Dreyers Rock Rd, RD2, Mauriceville, Masterton 5882. Email: aileen.weston@orcon.net.nz Rates: \$45 (single), \$55 (couples)

Wellington: Membership Secretary: Peter Cosgrove, 20 Amapur Drive, Khandallah. Email: cossiefamily@xtra.co.nz
Rates: \$59 (individual and family), \$48 (retired, individual and family), \$20 (student)