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THE AUSTRALIAN ILLICIT CIGARETTE TRADE

The Role of Transnational Organized Crime, Terrorism, and Societal Harm.

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THE AUSTRALIAN ILLICIT CIGARETTE TRADE: THE ROLE OF TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME, TERRORISM, AND SOCIETAL HARM

INTRODUCTION

Australia has recently emerged as one of the clearest case studies of the crime-terror nexus, where organized crime and foreign state-sponsored terrorism intersect.¹ In late 2024, the country experienced a series of arson attacks that were ultimately traced back to offshore terrorist handlers exploiting Australia's domestic illicit tobacco networks.^{2 3} In August 2025, the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) confirmed that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had directed two firebombing incidents in Sydney and Melbourne through its long-time proxy, Kazem "Kaz" Hamad.^{1 4}

The first attack occurred in October 2024, when the Lewis Continental Kitchen in Sydney was targeted in a firebombing coordinated by former Nomads bikie boss Sayed Mohammad Moosawi and his associates. Strike Force Pearl, a New South Wales Police operation, later secured charges against Moosawi and 14 others linked to the incident and to a wider pattern of antisemitic offenses.⁵ The second, in December 2024, targeted the Adass Israel Synagogue in Melbourne, resulting in more than AU\$20 million in damage.² Twenty-year-old Younes Ali Younes was charged in August 2025 for his role in this attack, which intelligence agencies attributed to direction from Hamad while offshore.^{3 6}

Hamad, a known tobacco smuggler previously deported from Australia, was identified as a central node connecting domestic organized crime groups to the IRGC's broader campaign against Israeli and Jewish targets.^{3 7} This revelation prompted Australia to expel Iran's ambassador, suspend its diplomatic mission in Tehran, and move toward formally designating the IRGC as a terrorist entity.¹ It also underscored how illicit markets, in this case, the lucrative tobacco trade, provide both the financing and infrastructure for terrorism.^{8 9}

These events illustrate the blurring boundary between organized crime and terrorism in Australia.^{1 4} What began as disputes over tobacco smuggling escalated into ideologically motivated violence, demonstrating how foreign actors can weaponize local criminal economies.^{3 7} The IRGC's operations in Australia mirror patterns seen elsewhere, where criminal networks are exploited as low-cost, low-visibility assets to conduct attacks.^{10 11} The Australian case shows that counter-terrorism policy cannot be divorced from tackling organized crime, particularly when the illicit tobacco trade has become a strategic enabler for offshore terrorist activity.^{8 9}

The opening salvo came on October 8, 2024, when the Lewis Continental Kitchen in Sydney was firebombed. According to police briefings, the attack was orchestrated by a figure with ties to outlaw motorcycle gangs and Middle Eastern crime circles. Several associates were later charged under Strike Force Pearl, which had been investigating a cluster of antisemitic crimes. The firebombing was part of a wider pattern of intimidation targeting Jewish businesses and communities.⁵

Two months later, on December 2, 2024, Melbourne's Adass Israel Synagogue was the target of an arson attack that caused over AU\$20 million in damages.² Intelligence later identified a 20-year-old offender as one of the perpetrators, and he was charged in August 2025.⁶ While the attack was initially treated as an isolated hate crime,

subsequent investigations revealed that it had been directed by offshore handlers linked to the IRGC.³ Both attacks marked a shift from financially motivated arson associated with the tobacco wars to ideologically motivated violence targeting Australia's Jewish community.^{3 7}

The investigation into these incidents quickly expanded beyond local policing. ASIO and the Australian Federal Police (AFP), working alongside state police task forces, traced operational command to Hamad, a deported figure once entrenched in Melbourne's tobacco underworld.^{3 7} Despite his removal from the country in 2023, Hamad continued to exert control from offshore, leveraging his network to carry out arsons, extortion, and, in this case, terrorist-linked firebombings.^{7 12}

By mid-2025, a multinational investigation involving Australian, Middle Eastern, and Five Eyes partners had confirmed that Hamad was acting under the direction of the IRGC. Offshore handlers funneled money through illicit market channels to conceal state involvement, while local criminal groups were subcontracted to execute the operations.^{1 4} Raids across Victoria and New South Wales resulted in multiple arrests, the dismantling of safehouses, and the seizure of communications that tied Hamad's syndicate to the IRGC's chain of command.^{1 3 4}

On August 26, 2025, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, joined by senior ministers and ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess, announced at a press conference that the IRGC had orchestrated the two arson attacks in Australia.^{1 4} The government expelled the Iranian ambassador and senior diplomats, suspended its embassy in Tehran, and signaled that the IRGC would soon be listed as a terrorist organization under Australian law.¹ This decision aligned Australia with allies such as the United States and Canada, which had already proscribed the IRGC.^{10 11}

The consequences extended beyond diplomacy. The attacks revealed the degree to which Australia's domestic organized crime, particularly its illicit tobacco economy, had become entangled with offshore terrorist agendas. For the first time, the crime-terror nexus was not just theoretical but visible: illicit profits were weaponized to operationalize attacks on Australian soil. This watershed moment has forced policymakers and law enforcement to reconsider illicit trade not simply as a tax issue, but as a front-line national security threat.^{8 9}

These findings also frame the importance of the broader discussion on Australia's crime-terror nexus. The illicit tobacco market, long considered a revenue and enforcement issue, has now been exposed as a strategic enabler of terrorism.^{8 9} It is this dynamic that the following sections will examine in greater detail.

As of August 2025, Australia has removed the Iranian ambassador from the country along with a suspension of its embassy following the discovery of the IRGC's involvement in the firebombing attacks.¹ Additionally, the IRGC will be listed as a terrorist entity by the Albanese government, consistent with some of its Western allies in the Five Eyes.^{10 11} Operationally, it is uncertain to what extent this designation would entail regarding information sharing and organizational objectives between Five Eyes members.¹⁰

However, it may provide legal leeway for Australia to pursue terrorism charges and enforcement response to IRGC-affiliated activity going forward, such as seeking surveillance warrants when investigating IRGC-related persons or groups of interest.¹ Furthermore, the designation may be a game-changer for curbing any terrorist

financing related to the organization that is facilitated by the illicit tobacco market, since it is now explicitly “terrorist.”^{8 9}

As of recently, Australian states are also collectively cracking down on illicit tobacco operations. On May 22, 2025, Queensland announced a new set of laws to combat illicit tobacco, including raising the penalty for culprits, and individuals turning a blind eye, including one year imprisonment, a AU\$161,300 fine, or both. Additionally, on July 27, 2025, New South Wales also set out new laws including higher degrees of penalty and more legal avenues for law enforcement and government entities to seize premises and terminate landlord ownership.¹³

Australia’s diligence towards combatting illicit tobacco has shown. On August 1, 2025, Queensland announced that they have seized a total of 45 million illicit cigarettes and issued over AU\$20 million worth in fines. Out of this money, they intend to invest AU\$12.7 million into recruiting 40 new enforcement officers for further anti-illicit tobacco efforts. In an operation that took place late August 2025, after the announcement was made, the Australian Border Force (ABF) and Queensland Police Service (QPS) initiated Operation Xray Modred, executing search warrants of 17 storage facilities. The searches led to the further seizure of approximately AU\$53.8 million worth of tobacco which makes the operation one of the most successful busts in Queensland history.¹³

The illicit tobacco market in Australia has been reported to make upwards of AU\$10 billion annually in revenue. In its 2024 report, FTI Consulting estimated that illegal consumption of tobacco accounted for 39.4% of all tobacco consumption in the nation, up from 28.6% in the previous year.¹⁴ On top of the problem of criminal proceeds, this leaves a drastic impact on Australia’s economy, with an estimated loss of tobacco excise revenue of AU\$6.7 billion.^{15 16} A contributing factor to the uptick in illicit tobacco in Australia can be pointed to the exorbitant excise tax at AU\$1.49 per 0.8 gram stick, increased in September 2025.^{15 17} On average, a pack of 20 cigarettes costs AU\$40, or US\$26. In comparison, as of April 2025 Canada has an excise duty rate of CA\$0.19 per stick and an “average” pack costing between CA\$15.36 to \$19.75 depending on the province.^{18 19}

Initially, the Australian government’s objective of adding excise tax on tobacco was to reduce the rate of smoking in the country.^{20 21} However, reductions in tobacco purchases are far from a telltale sign of lower smoking rates.^{22 23} With the high costs of tobacco, it is no wonder many would turn to less-than-legal methods to acquire it.¹⁴ Particularly, the excise tax would impact disadvantaged populations the most, as low socio-economic smokers were reported to be 25% more likely to engage in tax avoidance strategies such as using illicit roll-your-own (RYO) tobacco.^{24 25}

More recently, discussion over the tobacco excise tax in Australia has raised a conundrum as to whether it is reaching excessive amounts relative to its overall impact on smoking reduction.^{22 23} While smoking has steadily declined in Australia as reported by national surveys and Tobacco in Australia, further increases in taxation may not only have diminishing returns, but rather create more harm.^{26 27}

The illicit tobacco involves more than the simple transaction of contraband. Stakeholders, particularly those who sell them, have engaged in violence to establish rule over the market and for other nefarious purposes.^{28 29} Prior to the two firebomb attacks between 2024 and 2025, Australia had experienced a series of firebomb attacks in the past which have been linked to illicit tobacco kingpin Hamad, who was

deported from Australia to Iraq in 2023 was believed to be involved with 150 arson attacks targeting tobacco shops across Melbourne.^{7 12}

To note, he was linked to the arson attack on the Lux nightclub in November 2024, where the perpetrators of the incident drove in a blue Volkswagen Golf. According to a joint report by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the ASIO, and the Victoria Police, the same vehicle was allegedly used in the Adass Israel synagogue mentioned earlier and a shooting in Bundoora, both of which happened on the same night.³⁰ With Hamad's involvement in the Lux nightclub arson attack and the IRGC's link to the synagogue firebombing, both connected through the Volkswagen Golf vehicle, the IRGC may foreseeably be a benefactor to Hamad's illicit tobacco trade.^{1 3 4}

Indicatively, these illicit tobacco stakeholders would conduct attacks under the orders of their offshore clients.^{8 9} As such, this further highlights the importance of Australia in tackling its illicit tobacco problem.⁹ In the Australia Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre's (AUSTRAC) 2023-2024 National Risk Assessment on the threat of terrorist financing, the organization only briefly mentioned the involvement of illicit tobacco as a terrorist financing channel, possibly due to the prevalence of many other channels. However, with the recent events and how they are linked to this market, it is of utmost importance to highlight this single illegal commodity.^{8 9 31}

THE CONTEXT

While under the government's near-ban approach, most vaping products are now illegal or highly restricted, increasing consumer demand for illicit options and strengthening organized crime networks involved in the trade.^{32 33}

Illicit tobacco and vaping markets have serious consequences that go beyond just lost tax revenue. They are closely linked to rising violence and organized crime (and in some cases, funding terrorism). In parts of Australia, arson attacks and violent disputes between criminal groups fighting over market control have become disturbingly frequent, putting both shop owners and the public in danger. There's also growing evidence that profits from these illegal trades are being used to support human trafficking and extremist activities.^{34 35}

No other legal consumer product in Australia operates at the level of black-market penetration or with impunity due to a lack of social awareness of the causal effects and an implied consent within the community for the reduction of overall costs in product which is a reflection of free market economics being overregulated. International comparisons reveal that Australia's policy settings, characterized by aggressive taxation and a quasi-prohibitionist model, have created the perfect storm for a flourishing illicit market while undermining public health goals and safety.^{36 37}

The erosion of Australia's smoking reduction targets, while comparable countries such as Sweden and New Zealand approach smoke-free status³⁸; and billions in lost annual excise revenue, despite repeated tax hikes, highlighting the policy failure.³⁹

Australia's current enforcement and regulatory framework is ill-equipped to deal with the scale and sophistication of the illicit market creating a domino effect of lost tax revenue and under-funded state and federal law enforcement capacity to target this burgeoning criminal revenue line. This paper also argues that the situation requires urgent and unprecedented policy shifts, including excise stabilization, regulatory

reform, coordinated international enforcement, and alignment with global treaties such as the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products by the World Health Organization (WHO).

DRIVERS OF ILLICIT TOBACCO MARKET GROWTH

It is the predictable outcome of a policy environment that has prioritized aggressive taxation and restrictive access over pragmatic regulation and enforcement. These conditions have fostered a consumer-driven black market that is now deeply entrenched and increasingly difficult to dismantle.^{35 36}

Australia now has some of the most expensive tobacco products in the world, with packs of cigarettes retailing for up to AU\$50. This is the direct result of over 15 years of escalating excise tax policy, implemented under the assumption that price elasticity would continue to reduce legal consumption. Australian states and territories are failing similarly with alcohol floor pricing which created other streams of revenue generation for criminal enterprises. However, this assumption ignored a critical threshold: once prices exceed consumer affordability, alternative (illicit) markets become not only attractive but essential for many consumers.^{37 38}

Legal tobacco is now unaffordable for a growing segment of smokers, who are turning to untaxed, unregulated alternatives. The second-order effect is a growing acceptance of criminal enterprises at a surface level, driven by the perception that government interference has created a “Robin Hood” scenario, where the public protects those engaged in criminal conduct. This dynamic calls into question the historically tense Australian relationship with government regulation and enforcement, particularly in relation to tobacco control measures that are perceived as excessive or punitive. The government’s revenue data illustrates the failure of this approach: despite continued excise increases, tobacco tax collection has declined by over AU\$5 billion in just the last three years. The availability of cheap, tax-evading illicit tobacco not only sustains consumption among existing smokers but also risks attracting new smokers, thereby undermining the very basis of taxation as a deterrent against smoking. This is not a minor policy glitch. It is a structural collapse in the legal market, one that has directly incentivized criminal opportunism.³⁸

Australia’s current therapeutic model for nicotine vaping products has created a de facto ban on legal supply, with access restricted to pharmacies and contingent upon a doctor’s prescription in several states. While well-intentioned, this policy is out of step with global trends and consumer realities. The result is a near-total black market: estimates suggest that over 90% of all vaping products consumed in Australia are obtained illegally.^{39 40}

This illicit market is not hidden; it is a reflection of a failed free market. Vape shops operate openly in retail precincts, often indistinguishable from legitimate businesses with the population accepting of and even grateful for the opportunity to reduce the burden of living costs. There is little evidence of fear or secrecy among vendors or consumers due to the protection provided by the clients they serve, indicating a broad and systemic failure in both policy design and enforcement.⁴¹

The contrast with jurisdictions like New Zealand and Sweden is stark. Both have adopted pragmatic frameworks for alternative nicotine products, integrating them into

regulated, taxed markets. These countries are now achieving smoke-free status (defined as less than 5% daily smoking prevalence), while Australia's smoking rates have stagnated, despite years of aggressive control measures.^{42 43}

Contrary to the assumptions of prohibitionist policy, demand for nicotine has not abated.²² What has changed is how and where consumers obtain it. A thriving illicit ecosystem, characterized by low prices, high availability, and minimal enforcement risk, now meets the needs of both smokers and vape users who have been priced out or regulated out of the legal market. Australian tobacco enforcement officers are increasingly aware of the personal risks involved in enforcing these laws.⁴⁴ The price differential is now so stark that it may be difficult to recover consumer trust in legal products, even with policy reform.⁴⁵

Stabilizing excise and reintroducing regulated, accessible nicotine alternatives is essential, not just to recapture lost revenue, but to dismantle the demand side of the black market.⁴⁵

TOBACCO WARS: CRIME AND VIOLENCE

The supply chain for illicit tobacco entering Australia is sophisticated, well-capitalized, and difficult to disrupt. It spans multiple jurisdictions and involves⁴⁶:

- Capital-intensive production hubs overseas (particularly in Southeast Asia and the Middle East).
- Bribery and corruption of customs agents, freight forwarders, and logistics coordinators.
- Falsified shipping manifests, shell companies, and freight re-routing to avoid detection.
- Coordinated distribution networks within Australia that place illicit products into retail channels with minimal risk.

Many of these attacks were acts of retaliation or coercion, targeting business owners who refused to sell illicit tobacco or who were believed to be operating outside the control of a particular criminal group. These are not isolated incidents. They represent a systematic campaign of intimidation that mirrors the tactics of transnational drug cartels.⁴⁷

Organized crime groups now use "airtasking", a term used to describe people picking up "tasks" and conducting these crimes for as little as AU\$500 or \$1000⁴⁴—more like gig economy arsonists to carry out firebombings. These low-cost, high-impact acts of violence have created a climate of fear among legitimate retailers and have made it increasingly difficult for law enforcement to intervene in time to prevent escalation.⁴²

Across Australia, there are private businesses engaging security firms on regular deployments to provide a presence of safety, not for staff and customers, but for assets and facilities due to the prolific nature of arson and violent criminal damage.⁴⁸

Organized crime gangs and transnational crime syndicates are increasingly using the profits from the illicit tobacco trade to fund other serious criminal activities, including

terrorism. In particular, Australian crime groups are linked with outlaw motorcycle gangs, Middle Eastern crime syndicates, and other transnational networks that facilitate the smuggling of illicit tobacco into Australia. These groups use illicit tobacco as a revenue stream to fund violent and terrorist activities, including human trafficking and firearms smuggling.⁴⁷

Illicit tobacco and vaping products are now a proven funding stream for serious and transnational criminal organizations, including those with known or suspected ties to terrorism. The Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC) and the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC) have both identified illicit tobacco as a growing enabler of money laundering and an “increasing threat” to Australia’s national security.⁴⁴

Unlike in the United States, which has a specialized enforcement agency such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), Australia lacks a dedicated body focused solely on illicit tobacco and related criminal enterprises. Instead, the ACIC, a non-enforcement intelligence agency, plays a supporting role through investigations and intelligence gathering. Direct enforcement action is the responsibility of national agencies like the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the Australian Border Force (ABF). However, neither holds exclusive jurisdiction over illicit tobacco, and both operate within multi-agency task forces, such as the Illicit Tobacco Taskforce (ITTF), that rely on inter-agency coordination to disrupt these criminal networks.⁴⁹

ILLICIT TOBACCO CRIME-TERROR NEXUS — A NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT

Hezbollah has long operated in Australia, where it raises funds through both legal and illicit means. While the overwhelming majority of Australians are law-abiding, a small number of individuals have provided support to Hezbollah’s activities.⁵⁰ The Australian government has proscribed Hezbollah and similar organizations to deter financial and material assistance.^{50 51} Authorities have uncovered Hezbollah-linked tobacco smuggling operations, particularly involving counterfeit cigarettes from China, which generated significant illicit revenue and exploited Australia’s limited container inspection capacity.⁵¹

Between January and May 2009, Australian federal and state intelligence agencies uncovered a Hezbollah-linked network involved in the illicit tobacco trade. Surveillance focused on a female coordinator in her 40s with five children, based in Parramatta, Sydney, who operated a distribution network using 31 SIM cards. The operation moved counterfeit cigarettes through cargo containers, each potentially yielding up to AU\$250 million in street value. With only around 10% of incoming containers scanned, the smuggling process remained highly lucrative. However, despite the scale of the threat, law enforcement agencies lacked sufficient resources to dismantle these networks. By 2015, authorities were actively tracking more than 400 Hezbollah-related concerns.⁵¹

Although Hezbollah has operated in Australia since the 1980s, only its External Security Organization (ESO) was initially listed as a terrorist group in 2003. The ESO is responsible for foreign operations, including intelligence and terrorist attacks.⁵² In November 2021, Australia extended its designation to encompass all of Hezbollah. Like its affiliates in the US, Canada, and Europe, Hezbollah in Australia engages in compartmentalized fundraising, propaganda, and criminal activity.⁵⁰ While Iranian

state support has diminished due to economic sanctions, Hezbollah continues to fund itself through businesses and criminal enterprises within the Lebanese diaspora.⁵² It has also maintained ties with other terrorist groups, such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which are also proscribed in Australia.⁵⁰

Hezbollah's influence in Australia is occasionally visible in public and judicial actions. In May 2021, its flag was flown at pro-Palestinian rallies in Sydney, alarming the public, though it was not illegal at the time. In 2020, a Bulgarian court convicted Australian-Lebanese national Meliad Farah in absentia for a Hezbollah-linked terrorist attack in 2012.⁵³ Hezbollah-linked individuals and organizations, such as Ali Haider and Al-Mabarrat Benevolent Society, have faced scrutiny or sanctions.⁵⁰ The US has also highlighted Hezbollah's recruitment and financing strategies, including targeting dual nationals and using global money laundering networks like the Chams Organization, which funneled funds through Australia.⁵⁴ To date, Hezbollah sustains its operations by engaging in transnational criminal activities, with its financial networks extending across North America, Europe, and Australia.⁵⁵

Without stronger laws and greater resource investment, Australia risks becoming a haven for Hezbollah to recruit, fundraise, and plan attacks.⁵⁵ These criminal operations are coordinated by Hezbollah's Unit 910, the Organization for External Security's business arm, originally led by Imad Mughniyeh and later by Talal Hamia. Previously, only the ESO was designated as a terrorist entity, which limited enforcement efforts.⁵⁶ The full designation of Hezbollah now enables Australian authorities to better combat its criminal fundraising and terrorist activities.^{52 55}

In 2016, a former NSW policeman turned British American Tobacco (BAT) executive was assaulted in Sydney in an incident believed to be connected to organized crime syndicate families in Sydney and Melbourne who are involved in illicit tobacco smuggling since he has been supporting the transnational police investigations against them. This incident occurred less than a year after an undercover agent was threatened while covertly assisting organized crime investigators targeting tobacco smuggling operations. One of those syndicate families was found to have used its profits to finance cocaine imports and is also connected to fundraising for a Lebanese community group with loose ties to Hezbollah.⁵⁷

The Australian Federal Police also stated that the majority of Middle Eastern OCGs funnel their illicit tobacco profits back to the Middle East in a 2016 interview. One such group, operating in Arncliffe, Sydney, was connected to fundraising efforts for a Lebanese charity also linked to Hezbollah.⁵⁸

In 2019, Strike Force DeHaar, a task force comprising the Australian Border Force (ABF), ACIC, Australian Taxation Office, AUSTRAC, and New South Wales Police Force, investigated and ultimately arrested eight individuals in New South Wales. They were part of an organized criminal syndicate involved in terrorism financing through the importation of illicit tobacco and drugs.⁵⁹

Terrorist groups worldwide have exploited tobacco smuggling as a reliable revenue stream. In Gaza, for example, Hamas generates millions of dollars each month from taxing smuggled cigarettes.^{60 61} This pattern reflects the way Hezbollah and its affiliates have engaged in similar operations in Australia, underscoring the broader connection between illicit tobacco markets and terrorist financing.

TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL NETWORKS AND ILLICIT SUPPLY CHAINS

The illicit tobacco and vaping economy in Australia is not just a domestic issue. It is driven by powerful transnational criminal networks with deep connections across the Middle East, Asia, and beyond. These networks exploit Australia's high-tax environment, fragmented enforcement landscape, and porous freight systems to smuggle millions of dollars worth of illicit products into the country.⁶²

In December 2024, Hamad's syndicate was also drawn into a far more politically sensitive investigation when the Adass Israel Synagogue in Melbourne was firebombed. Authorities are probing whether proceeds from the illicit tobacco trade financed the attack. The AFP and ASIO subsequently established Taskforce Avalite to investigate antisemitic violence and extremist-linked arsons.² At a press conference, AFP Deputy Commissioner Krissy Barrett confirmed that Hamad's name had surfaced as one of the lines of inquiry.⁶ Multiple media outlets reported that police are examining whether Hamad, directing operations from overseas, worked with Victorian associates to carry out the synagogue firebombing.⁶³ Two men have been arrested, with the second alleged offender now reported to have direct links to Hamad's syndicate.⁶² This episode underscores how illicit tobacco profits may not only fuel organized crime, but also bleed into ideologically motivated violence, blurring the boundary between crime and terrorism.³

Further reports suggested that the IRGC also tapped bikies and hired criminals to intimidate Jewish communities, with offshore handlers funnelling payments through black-market channels to mask their involvement. Some of those recruited had prior ties to tobacco smuggling, showing how existing criminal networks were repurposed for foreign influence.⁵ Recent reporting by ABC News In-depth also highlighted how these intimidation efforts were linked to broader campaigns targeting Jewish Australians, reinforcing the intersection of organized crime, illicit trade, and foreign interference.⁴

Former Mongols bikie Suleiman "Sam" Abdulrahim was a central figure in Australia's illicit tobacco trade, with his criminal activities illustrating the growing involvement of OMCGs in smuggling operations, particularly counterfeit and untaxed tobacco products. His operations brought him into direct conflict with Hamad, who twice attempted to assassinate him but failed. Their rivalry intensified Melbourne's tobacco wars, fueling a surge in arson attacks and violent confrontations as these groups vied for control over the lucrative black market.⁶⁵ Abdulrahim's trajectory ended violently when he was shot dead in Melbourne in January 2025, a murder that underscored both the volatility of the illicit tobacco economy and the significant role OMCGs and associated criminal networks play in sustaining it.⁶⁶

Kuwait-based drug trafficking-related OCG leader Ahmed Al-Hamza, secretly designated as an "Australian Priority Organization Target" by ACIC, has been instrumental to Hamad as his business partner in his participation in the tobacco war. Like Hamza, other illicit tobacco OCGs have also been burning down tobacco stores that refuse to bow down to their demands by using "an online gig economy of arsonists."⁸

Hamza's rival, the Haddara syndicate, was reported as Victoria's largest tobacco importer and distributor. The Lebanese-decent Haddara family has also expanded their operations overseas and partnered themselves with criminally linked-customs brokers and freight forwarders.⁶⁷

A senior Australian law enforcement official noted that criminal allegiances have shifted significantly since 2016, with most illicit tobacco imports continuing to originate from the Middle East, relying on established drug trafficking networks. These operations are primarily driven by profit and are dominated by Middle Eastern criminal groups.⁶⁸

Although there is no extensive documentation directly linking specific Chinese mafia gangs to cigarette smuggling in Australia, former ABF's Tobacco Strike Team head Rohan Pike said that he suspected that the Chinese government controls the industrial-scale smuggling of Double Happiness cigarette brands in Australia after he was blocked by the ABF from traveling to Hong Kong, which he assumed was due to "political sensitivities." In August 2024, the ABF intercepted a shipment from China to New South Wales, disguised as a vending machine, containing nearly 12 million illegal cigarettes, preventing an estimated AU\$15.3 million in lost tax revenue. Similarly, in September 2024, black-market Chinese tobacco and vape suppliers openly bragged on social media about evading Australian customs, highlighting enforcement challenges.⁶⁹

Illicit tobacco thus serves as a "seed funding" mechanism—a low-risk, high-margin source of capital that underwrites the broader operations of transnational crime groups.⁷⁰

In Southeast Asia, Cambodia has become a notable source in the illicit tobacco trade impacting Australia, with significant quantities of unregulated tobacco products entering through complex transnational networks. Factors such as limited regulatory oversight and porous borders in Cambodia facilitate the production and export of these illegal products. These goods often reach Australia via maritime routes, evading customs checks and contributing to the local black market. According to the World Bank, Cambodia exported over 770,000 kilograms of cigarettes containing tobacco in 2023, highlighting its substantial role in the global tobacco trade.⁷¹

An organized crime syndicate with links to an unspecified Southeast Asian country was also revealed to be involved in a large-scale illicit tobacco importation when the ABF and Queensland Police Service conducted a joint operation where they seized 57 million illegal cigarettes in 2018.⁷²

A recent report from Transparency International Australia (TIA) in partnership with KordaMentha shows that 'dirty money' flowing across transnational borders, including from Cambodia, tends to move out of poorer countries and into the economies of wealthier nations, including Australia. Australia's current Anti-Money Laundering and Counter Terrorism Financing (AML/CTF) legislative framework, and in particular its failure to implement 'Tranche 2' reforms and effectively regulate Designated Non-Financial Businesses and Professions (DNFBPs) makes Australia an attractive destination for such funds moving illegally out of the Southeast Asian Region.⁷³ In general terms, the current Australian legislative regime does not sufficiently deter criminals from laundering money through Australia's real estate and the broader economy.

FROM ILLICIT PROFITS TO PUBLIC HARM

Despite his deportation overseas, Hamad has continued to exert influence in Melbourne, directing firebombings, shootings, extortion, and drug trafficking operations

through trusted lieutenants and local enforcers.⁷ Police intelligence suggests that he remains the architect of the tobacco wars, orchestrating events remotely while maintaining strong financial and logistical control.³⁰

While there have been attempts among rival crime families to stabilize the conflict and even unify operations, Hamad has consistently resisted such arrangements. Rather than sharing control, he has sought to place himself above the other syndicates, demanding dominance over Victoria's illicit tobacco market.⁷⁴ This insistence on supremacy has fueled cycles of violence and prevented any meaningful consolidation of the underworld.

Court proceedings have shed light on the organizational depth of these operations. One alleged "regional manager," Majid Alibadi, is accused of coordinating arsons, vehicle thefts, and extortion schemes on Hamad's behalf. Other younger "foot soldiers" have faced charges for intimidation, firebombings, and money collection, underscoring the syndicate's reliance on expendable actors to shield leadership from direct exposure.⁷⁵

The scale of violence linked to the tobacco wars has become unprecedented. More than 130 arson attacks, multiple targeted shootings, and several murders have been attributed to this conflict.⁷⁶ In February 2025, the rivalry with Abdulrahim culminated in his assassination, an event widely viewed as part of Hamad's campaign to consolidate control.^{12 77} Only months later, Melbourne witnessed another brazen killing: a man gunned down in daylight near a kindergarten which demonstrated the risks this conflict poses to public safety.⁷⁸

The overlap with extremist violence has amplified official concerns. The December 2024 firebombing of the Adass Israel Synagogue, for which Hamad's syndicate is under investigation, raised the prospect that illicit tobacco profits may have helped finance an ideologically motivated attack.⁷⁹

Taken together, these developments reveal how Australia's illicit tobacco trade has become a central node in the crime-terror nexus. It is no longer simply a matter of lost tax revenue, but a driver of systemic violence, corruption, and extremist risk, blurring the boundaries between organized crime and terrorism in ways that demand a coordinated national security response.

ATMS AND THE LAUNDERING OF ILLICIT TOBACCO PROFITS

The illicit tobacco trade's reach now extends beyond arson and violence into avenues that compromise the integrity of financial systems. Rather than traditional wires or cash exchanges, which can trigger scrutiny, criminal syndicates have found a convenient laundering gateway: private ATMs.

An ABC investigation revealed how private ATM operators like Macquarie Group-backed Next Payments and NCR's Cashzone have placed machines inside tobacconist stores selling illegal cigarettes. These machines facilitate near-instant cash turnover, pushing illicit profits into the formal banking system without detection.⁸⁰

⁸¹ Worse, shopkeepers are often allowed to load cash directly, effectively self-cashing proceeds of crime, undermining anti-money laundering safeguards.⁸⁰

Regulators have highlighted this loophole. Authorities like AUSTRAC note that private ATMs are exempt from key anti-money laundering laws, meaning they do not require know-your-customer (KYC) checks, transaction monitoring, or source-of-funds verification, protections that would otherwise flag suspicious activities. Experts such as Doron Goldbarsht from Macquarie University's Financial Integrity Hub warn that this setup is a "perfect money-laundering loophole," where dirty money is seamlessly layered into legitimate financial channels.⁸¹

In response, industry actors are starting to retreat. Next Payments reportedly removed over 40 ATMs from suspected illicit tobacco outlets after media scrutiny, and payment processors like EFTEX have ceased servicing machines in high-risk venues.⁸¹

This laundering pathway is symptomatic not just of criminal ingenuity, but of regulatory inertia. It occurs within a broader policy impasse: high excise taxes on legal tobacco continue to fuel the black market, prompting political figures, like NSW Premier Chris Minns, to advocate lowering excise rates in hopes of undercutting the criminal profits that flow through unregulated ATMs.⁸² However, critics argue such moves risk normalizing lower tobacco prices and undermining public health objectives.

This intersection of crime, finance, and policy underscores how illicit tobacco smuggling has pervaded deeper into socio-economic systems, showing that financial regulations cannot be siloed when addressing threats that cross from organized crime into public policy.

ILLICIT TOBACCO FUNDING NORTH KOREA

Australian authorities arrested Jin Guanghua in March 2023 at the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's request for smuggling tobacco for North Korea, which generated US\$700 million to fund the country's nuclear and ballistic weapons program for a decade. Along with his co-conspirators North Korean banker Sim Hyon-Sop and Chinese nationals Qin Guoming and Han Linlin, Jin established registered companies in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, UAE, and China as fronts to operate their smuggling scheme. Authorities also believe that these individuals have ties to Australia, especially since Jin was the founding director of the Melbourne-based company, Solomon Australia Pty Ltd, established in 2021.⁸³

According to the indictment issued by the US District Court for the District of Columbia in 2022, North Korea has been engaging in the purchase and sale of illicit tobacco trade to generate revenue for its Weapons of Mass Destruction proliferation programs, and it is being financed by US Department of Treasury-designated banks, Foreign Trade Bank (FTB) and Korea Kwangson Banking Corp. (KKBC), which "used Chinese front companies to conduct US dollar financial transactions, in their effort to funnel US dollar funds to and from North Korea through the US financial system."⁸⁴

Jin, together with Qin and Han, established and ran at least eight companies in Dubai and other locations to act as middlemen and facilitators for two military- and government-owned North Korean tobacco companies only named "NKTC1" and "NKTC2". Through these and other tobacco companies, North Korea has been earning revenues through the bulk purchase, manufacture, and trafficking of counterfeit cigarettes. Meanwhile, Dubai-based FTB employee Sim Hyon-Sop "funded certain...transactions through transfers from various financial accounts and associates."⁸⁴

It was found out that, from February 2009 to March 2019, these four conspirators ran the scheme of acquiring raw tobacco and other products from international producers and paid them in US dollars through Chinese front companies, false shipping records, and other deceptive means to make them appear that the shipments will go to China and not North Korea.⁸⁴

This case demonstrates how North Korea has systematically utilized the illicit tobacco trade as a means of sustaining its sanctioned economy and generating revenue for its Weapons of Mass Destruction programs. By relying on a network of front companies, falsified records, and foreign intermediaries, the regime has been able to obscure the origins and destinations of its shipments, secure access to international markets, and obtain hard currency despite international restrictions.

AUSTRALIA'S LACK OF TREATY ENGAGEMENT AND RISE OF SOCIAL HAVOC

Despite being a signatory to the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), Australia is not a party to the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, a 2012 treaty designed to facilitate global cooperation against tobacco smuggling. Sixty-nine countries, including the UK, France, Germany, and Sweden, are signatories.⁸⁵

Australia's absence from this treaty significantly hampers its international collaboration capacity. Law enforcement and intelligence agencies lack access to shared data, enforcement tools, and multilateral support that would allow coordinated disruption of smuggling syndicates.⁸⁶

The social consequences of Australia's booming illicit tobacco and vaping market extend well beyond tax losses and regulatory failure. The violence, criminality, and public health stagnation caused by these black markets are eroding the sentiment of public safety and weakening institutional trust.⁸⁷

Australia is now in the midst of the Tobacco Wars, a violent and escalating turf war fueled by organized crime groups vying for control of illicit nicotine distribution networks, and by proxy supported by the free market adjustments to the financial stressors placed on the population. These are not isolated incidents, but part of a broader, coordinated, and well-financed effort to dominate the country's thriving black market. Law enforcement agencies have struggled to keep pace, repeatedly outmaneuvered by the scale, speed, and sophistication of these criminal operations while not having a clear directive to tackle the industry separate to the concept of countering terrorism which lacks definitive guidance on battling illicit tobacco without correlated evidence to prove the link.⁸⁸

The country's aggressive taxation regime and quasi-prohibitionist vaping policy have also produced an unintended and deeply damaging outcome: stagnation in smoking prevalence and a surge in illegal product use. Key facts include:

- Over 90% of vaping consumers in Australia are using products illegally, without a valid prescription under the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) model.⁸⁹

- Australia has stalled at around 11% daily smoking prevalence, while countries such as New Zealand and Sweden, through pragmatic policies around alternative nicotine products, are approaching or have already achieved smoke-free incidence (below 5%).⁹⁰
- The current approach has failed to reduce consumption, while simultaneously fueling illicit trade, undermining trust in law enforcement, and exposing consumers to untested, unregulated, and potentially dangerous products.²³

In other words, Australia's war on nicotine has not only failed, but it also has created a black market ecosystem that actively undermines national health objectives and contributes to the national threat level of a terrorist incident.⁹¹

POLICY FAILURE AND THE RISE OF TOBACCO WARS

The term "Tobacco Wars" has now entered the public discourse to describe the brutal and calculated turf battles unfolding across Australia. These wars are characterized by firebombings and arson attacks on businesses that refuse to cooperate with syndicates or that threaten rival distribution networks; acts of retaliation and intimidation, including assaults, extortion, and threats against store owners, employees, and non-sworn enforcement agents, as well as the families of all and sundry families; and systemic fear and silence in communities, where legitimate retailers are increasingly afraid to report incidents to police, fearing violent reprisal.^{92 93}

Australia has unintentionally created a dual incentive for criminal syndicates: one is that cigarettes are prohibitively taxed, making smuggled or locally manufactured illicit tobacco an attractive option for both retailers and consumers; and two, vaping is effectively banned, forcing all demand, estimated at over 1 million users, into an unregulated, untaxed, and criminal supply chain.⁹⁴

The result: Australia has become one of the most lucrative markets for organized crime globally, offering both high rewards and low risk. This dual policy failure has made it a magnet for syndicates based in the Middle East, China, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe.⁴¹

The scale of financial loss and social disorder linked to these policy failures is staggering. There is a collapse in tax collection of over AU\$5 billion in annual foregone excise revenue despite repeated increases in rates. Australia's law enforcement system is also overwhelmed by violence, arson, smuggling, and intimidation related to tobacco and vape distribution, and, in effect, there is an erosion of public trust in both health policy and the rule of law, as the public openly accesses illegal products in plain sight, with no consequences.^{95 96}

Australia has reached a tipping point. Without a fundamental shift in approach, the Tobacco Wars will become even more entrenched, and the country will face escalating criminal violence, persistent health stagnation, and deepening fiscal losses.⁹

REEVALUATING AUSTRALIA'S POLICY MODEL

The illicit tobacco and vaping markets in Australia represent a highly complex, rapidly evolving crisis that demands immediate and coordinated action at the national and

international levels. This is not simply a matter of enforcing stronger domestic laws; it requires a comprehensive, multilateral approach that includes strategic policy changes, international cooperation, intelligence sharing, and the reformulation of global tobacco control strategies.

Australia has struggled to get its nicotine control policies right. Instead of cutting demand, strict bans have pushed more people toward the black market. At the same time, high tobacco taxes have made legal products so expensive that many turn to cheaper, illegal options instead. The quasi-prohibition of vaping products has led to over 90% of users sourcing their products illegally.²⁴

The continued fragmentation of efforts between federal, state, and local agencies has allowed criminal networks to operate with minimal interference, rendering enforcement largely ineffective.⁹⁷ With this, the situation demands that Australia reassess its entire approach, shifting from punitive measures to practical, evidence-based reforms that can break the cycle of crime and policy failure.

Nevertheless, Australia must not tackle this issue alone. The success of illicit trade networks is based on the global nature of the supply chain. Transnational criminal organizations exploit weak borders, inconsistent enforcement, and legal loopholes to facilitate the smuggling of illicit tobacco and vaping products.⁹⁸

To fight this, multilateral action is critical. Intelligence sharing between countries should be drastically improved to track the movement of illicit goods. Australia should partner with key international law enforcement agencies, including Interpol, Europol, and agencies in Asia and the Middle East, to dismantle transnational networks while, at the same time, defining the responsibility amongst law enforcement agencies or establishing the correct process to handle the matter.⁹⁹

Australia is already a signatory to the WHO's Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, yet greater emphasis must be placed on its full implementation. This protocol provides mechanisms for stronger cross-border collaboration, intelligence sharing, and international coordination in tracking and intercepting illicit tobacco and vaping shipments, all of which are critical to countering the transnational nature of the trade.¹⁰⁰

Governments should align regulations on vaping, tobacco products, and their respective taxation across both federal and state levels, as inconsistencies in policy create loopholes that criminal networks actively exploit.¹⁰¹ At the same time, regulatory settings should be reviewed and re-calibrated to ensure that enforcement and taxation measures are proportionate to risk. Harmonizing these frameworks would strengthen enforcement practices, reduce opportunities for illicit operators, and support the creation of a more coordinated international enforcement system, one capable of disrupting smuggling operations and diminishing the incentives for organized crime syndicates to target the Australian market.

To effectively tackle this problem, Australia must undergo a radical rethinking of its nicotine control strategy. Current policies are failing on multiple fronts:

- Excessive excise taxation continues to incentivize tax evasion, while the rising costs of legal tobacco products have disproportionately impacted smokers in low-income communities, making them more susceptible to the allure of illicit, tax-evading alternatives.¹⁰²

- Vaping products should not be subject to the same prohibitive measures. Evidence from other countries, including New Zealand and Sweden, shows that regulating nicotine products within a legal, controlled, taxed framework results in lower smoking rates and a reduction in the illicit market.¹⁰³

Australia must move away from a punitive model and adopt a more pragmatic, long-term strategy for nicotine regulation that balances health objectives with market realities.

A policy shift is required that reduces consumer demand for illicit products while also intervening in the supply chain of criminal groups. This includes introducing stronger regulations on the online trade of illicit nicotine products and closing gaps in border enforcement that allow for easy smuggling.¹⁰⁴

Beyond eliminating the illicit market, Australia must refocus its policies to protect public safety and improve health outcomes, if not solely for public health, to disrupt the growing insurgency-style funding operations that threaten national interests. Targeted interventions should aim to curb the accessibility of illicit products while ensuring that legal alternatives, such as nicotine replacement therapies and regulated vaping, remain available to those who need them.

Community-based education and prevention programs must be strengthened to reduce the overall demand for tobacco and nicotine products, while simultaneously raising awareness about the dangers of illicit and unregulated goods and the broader impact of what they are funding. The focus should be on providing safe, regulated access to nicotine products, not pushing consumers into the arms of dangerous black-market distributors who undermine the public health system.²⁵

A more effective law enforcement approach is also essential. The current landscape allows criminal groups to flourish with relative impunity. To rectify this, law enforcement agencies in Australia must prioritize the investigation and dismantling of criminal networks involved in the illicit tobacco trade. This requires both federal and state agencies to share intelligence and resources more effectively. They should also adopt innovative tracking and tracing mechanisms for both illicit tobacco and vaping products. Working with international partners, Australia can create a stronger framework to monitor the supply chain and prevent the entry of illicit goods into the country.¹⁰⁵

Criminal justice reform is also needed to ensure that those involved in the illicit trade of nicotine products face serious consequences, including mandatory minimum sentences for key players in organized criminal enterprises.¹⁰⁵

THE PATH FORWARD: SOLUTIONS, INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION, AND LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

Australia is facing a rapidly expanding illicit tobacco and vaping crisis that poses a serious threat to public health, safety, and the national economy. Tackling this issue demands decisive, multi-layered action, rooted in strong policy reform, enhanced enforcement, smarter regulation, and international cooperation.

The priority must be stopping the accelerating growth of the illegal trade. One critical step is stabilizing excise taxes to narrow the price gap between legal and illicit products.

Instead of aggressive and unpredictable hikes, a more measured, gradual tax strategy, paired with improved enforcement, can help curb black market demand without undermining health objectives. Excise revenue was estimated at AU\$12.7 billion in 2022-23¹⁷, yet historical excise policies reveal that steep increases in duty have often widened the affordability gap with illicit tobacco.¹⁰⁶ Ensuring excise revenues accurately reflect the size of the legal market also requires tightening collection mechanisms, eliminating vulnerabilities, and undertaking a detailed evaluation of past tax settings to identify scenarios that could minimize price differentials. Illicit tobacco continues to deprive the Commonwealth of an estimated AU\$600 million annually¹⁵, compounding broader revenue recovery challenges¹⁶. At the same time, taxation must remain aligned with public health objectives, as higher prices have proven effective in reducing overall tobacco consumption when balanced carefully with enforcement and regulatory measures.²⁶

Reforming vaping laws is equally essential. Australia's current near-prohibition model has proven ineffective, driving consumers toward an unregulated market. A new approach is needed, one which considers that vaping products should be regulated to provide consumers with legal pathways of access outside the therapeutic framework, which remains significantly underutilized. Despite recent reforms allowing certain low-nicotine vaping products to be sold over-the-counter in pharmacies in many states (for example under 20 mg/mL nicotine)¹⁰⁷, and exponential increases in vaping prevalence among young people and non-smokers²⁷, actual uptake of legal, regulated alternatives has lagged. For instance, pharmacies have been slow to supply non-prescription vapes even after legal changes¹⁰⁸; many users still rely on informal or illicit supply channels rather than the therapeutic route, which suggests the framework is not yet fulfilling its intended deterrent effect. By establishing a balanced model that allows access to controlled, tested nicotine vaping products through both prescription and regulated non-prescription channels, Australia can provide a safer legal option while reducing the appeal and profitability of illegal supply chains.

Law enforcement efforts must also scale up to meet the size of the problem. Stronger penalties for trafficking and organized crime involvement in the illicit trade are needed, with structures that enable law enforcement to target these organizations more effectively, alongside more rigorous border inspections.¹³ Intercepting illegal shipments before they reach Australian consumers is not just critical, but imperative to protecting both public health and national security.¹⁰⁹ National consistency in legislation is also essential to ensure that organized crime groups face uniform penalties for illicit trade across all jurisdictions, preventing exploitation of regulatory disparities. To achieve this, recommendations should include a national review into fiscal and policy settings across tobacco and other nicotine products¹¹⁰, the introduction of Canada-style reporting and disclosure obligations for private ATM providers¹¹¹, and consideration of a national regulator, modeled on the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), to coordinate enforcement and oversight.¹¹²

Technology can play a powerful role in enforcement. Introducing digital tracking tools, such as blockchain or smart packaging, can help monitor products throughout the supply chain and authenticate legal goods.¹¹³ At the same time, investing in modern customs technologies will strengthen Australia's capacity to detect and seize illicit shipments more effectively.¹¹⁴

While short-term actions are urgent, they must be supported by a long-term vision. Australia should shift toward a harm-reduction strategy that balances public health with

consumer choice. This includes widening access to legal nicotine alternatives and launching public education campaigns about the dangers of black-market products, many of which contain toxic, unregulated substances.^{112 114}

Ultimately, success depends on unified leadership and a national commitment to tackling this issue on all fronts. Federal and state governments must work together to chart a path that protects public safety, rebuilds lost tax revenue, and weakens the grip of organized crime.¹¹²

The stakes are high. Without bold, coordinated reform, the illicit nicotine trade will continue to undermine Australia's public health goals and drain billions from the economy. The time for action is now, through smarter policies, international collaboration, and long-term strategic thinking, Australia can begin to reclaim control over this growing crisis.

CONCLUSION

The illicit trade in tobacco and vaping products in Australia has grown steadily, shaped by high taxes, strict regulations, and strong demand. While these policies are intended to protect public health, they have also created an environment where illegal markets can flourish. These markets not only reduce the impact of public health efforts but also result in lost government revenue and increased activity by organized crime groups.

Enforcement efforts have achieved some short-term wins, such as seizures and arrests, but they have not kept pace with the scale and sophistication of the illicit trade. Agencies face challenges in coordination, intelligence sharing, and capacity, which limit their ability to target the broader supply chains. At the same time, enforcement continues to focus on low-level actors rather than those who organize and profit most from the trade.

Recent reforms, especially around vaping, may unintentionally expand the illegal market if they are not matched by realistic enforcement strategies and a better understanding of how demand will shift. Without clear regulation and consistent enforcement, criminal groups will continue to exploit gaps between what is legally available and what consumers seek.

To address this issue effectively, Australia needs a more coordinated and informed approach. This includes improving intelligence, strengthening cooperation between agencies, and designing policies that reflect how these markets operate in practice. Without these changes, illicit tobacco and vaping products will remain widely available that put health, safety, and public resources at ongoing risk.

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