Panel 2: Addressing the Causes - How Can Embracing Community and Diversity Approaches Contribute to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

Countering the Threat of Terror: Lessons from the Global and Local Context

Sara Salman, Lecturer in Criminology, Victoria University of Wellington

Executive summary

The following brief is in response to the Terrorist Attack on the Christchurch Masjidain. The brief outlines the threat of lone-wolf white supremacy terrorism. The brief examines the resurgence of lone-wolf white supremacy, and the constellations of factors that are conducive to this type of terrorism. The brief describe the global and local contexts of the threat. It commends New Zealand for taking the lead on fighting terrorism, and makes recommendations in light of the current research on and international response to the phenomenon.

Introduction

On 15th March, 2019, Brenton Tarrant carried out a terrorist attack against New Zealand, targeting our Muslim community. Armed with assault weapons and tactical gear, he targeted two mosques in Christchurch, killing 51 people and injuring 40. The attack came as a shock, signalling to New Zealand that our small island nation is part of a world that has been struggling with white supremacy terror attacks, which have been on the increase for the past decade. The brief connects this terrorist attack to global patterns of white supremacy terrorism, drawing on research that focuses on the United States and Europe. The brief will discuss the context and definition of the phenomenon, the profile of perpetrators, the factors and motivations behind such attacks, the roles of economic and symbolic losses and the Internet in the resurgence of white supremacy terrorism, how the Christchurch terror attack fits the global pattern, and recommendations for our government.

Context and Definition

Terrorism is defined in New Zealand under the Terrorism Suppression Act to be any act "carried out for the purpose of advancing an ideological, political, or religious cause" with the intent to "induce terror in a civilian population" or "to unduly compel or to force a government or an international organisation to do or abstain from doing any act."[1] The definition aligns with standard international definitions of terrorism. It highlights ideological motivations as underpinning the violence planned or committed. The New Zealand government has been on the forefront of addressing the threat of Islamist organized terrorist groups. The New Zealand government is currently exploring how to tackle other forms of terrorism, specifically terrorism motivated by white supremacy ideologies such as anti-Muslim and neo-Nazism terrorism. The term white supremacy terrorism encompasses organized terrorist groups as well as individual terrorists.

The terror attack that New Zealand witnessed in 2019 is an example of a white supremacy individual terrorist attack. It was committed by an actor unaffiliated with terrorist organizations. Although such an attack is unprecedented in New Zealand, it is neither anomalous nor is it singular. The attack aligns with a resurgent type of attacks carried out by sole perpetrators globally, and fits a profile seen in the United States and Europe: The lone-wolf white supremacy terrorist. Lone-wolf attacks carried in the name of white supremacy ideologies, including anti-Muslim and Neo-Nazi ideologies, against civilian populations have the intent of advancing the ideology of white supremacy and terrorising civilian communities characterised by diversity and pluralism.

---

[1] Terrorism Suppression Act 2002. 5. Terrorist Act Defined.
https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2002/0034/latest/DLM152702.html

The brief focuses on the lone-wolf terror attack, defined as an attack committed by a solo actor, who has not been formally trained or recruited by a terrorist organization. Because the terrorist attack on the Christchurch Masjidain is of the lone-wolf white supremacy terror attack type, the brief specifically addresses it.

Lone-Wolf Terrorism: A Profile

The central question facing social scientists and policy makers today is the profile of the attacker: who typically carries these attacks, and what motivates them to do so?

Research on lone-wolf attacks constructs the following profile of perpetrators:

- **Gender**: Male
- **Age**: The majority of perpetrators are in their 20s. The average age is 35; skewed by a small number of older perpetrators
- **Ideology and Ethnic Identification**: Lone-wolf terrorists exist along an ideological spectrum. The spectrum ranges from Islamist terrorists to white supremacist terrorists. However, the majority of the lone-wolf terror attacks are committed in the name of white supremacy ideologies (e.g. Neo-Nazi, Anti-Muslim, Anti-Semitic, Anti-immigrant). Notable also is that the majority of the perpetrators identify as white or European
- **Online Connections**: Lone-wolf attackers since 2010 especially have online presence and connections among enabling spectators
- **Broadcasting the intent to attack**: Perpetrators often release manifestos, videos or written expressions of intent, or share their intent with friends and family
- **Weapons used in the attack**: Perpetrators are over-armed, usually with semi-automatic weapons. Laws regulating explosive material successfully restricted access to dangerous explosive material
- **Motivation**: Political grievances are intertwined with personal grievances and form motivations to commit targeted violence.

Lone-Wolf Terrorism: A Constellation of Motivating Factors

There is no single causal factor that produces lone-wolf terrorists. Terrorists often share attitudes of misogyny and racism among each other and with the rest of the population, but such attitudes do not always translate into terror attacks. Not every person who holds deeply racist or misogynistic beliefs or attitudes is going to carry out a violent attack. At such, what is proposed is a constellation of factors that exist in our society today which together are conducive to violence. These are:

- *Gender.* Men make up the vast majority of terror attacks, including lone-wolf terrorism. In addition, men with histories of violence against women make up a particularly high-risk group prone to extremist violence. In recent years, Western countries have seen the rise of terrorism committed by men who identify as "incel" whose agenda demands subjugation of women and who also espouse white supremacist beliefs such as anti-immigrant beliefs.
- *Economic and symbolic loss of status.* Experienced especially by men during economic recessions and chronic unemployment. The experience of loss becomes a political grievance. Governments and political leaders are often blamed for losses, and ethnic minority communities are targeted as the enemy.
- *Personal grievances.* These include experiences of bullying and romantic rejections (romantic rejections are usually connected to menacing and violent behaviour like stalking). Personal grievances merge with political grievances. The latter grievances offer avenues of expression

for the former grievances. Perpetrators transform their personal failure into socio-political issues and ideological signposts.

- *Online radicalization*. Digital platforms including social media function as (unmonitored) spaces of hateful ideologies and extremism. Online peers may become enabling spectators (a group that does not commit acts of violence but supports and encourages them online).
- *Possession of weapons of war*. Lone-wolf terrorists overarm, often utilizing lax gun-laws. Weapons of choice are semi-automatic assault weapons, which appear similar to military-grade weaponry and amplify the terrorist's belief that the terror attack is an act of righteous war. New Zealand is ahead of the curve relative to other countries; stricter gun legislation was passed after the attack to prevent future attacks.

Economic and Symbolic Losses

- The post-industrial shift corresponded to cultural changes in societies such as New Zealand. Changes such as the rise of immigration and women's entry into the labour force are good changes for the country overall. However, the positive impact of such changes is uneven. For some men, these changes meant a loss of social status. Cultural changes experienced in conjunction with economic losses generate feelings of resentment, especially for less-educated (with secondary education or less) Pākehā/European descent men who have experienced "downward mobility" in comparison to their parents and grandparents. The resentment is often channelled into suspicion and hostility toward women and hatred of minorities, both of which are blamed for men's decline. Experiences of social economic losses are reinterpreted as persecution or injustice, and the government is in turn accused of favouring women and minorities.
- Although grievances are amplified online (see below), grievances may find spaces in mainstream society, and may feed on sentiments expressed in mainstream society. For instance, political conversations about immigration or resettlement of refugees that frame them as "burdensome" to the country, or as "queue jumpers" often inflame existent feelings of persecution especially among at risk groups of Pākehā/European decent economically and socially insecure groups young men. Such at-risk groups may feel that minority groups are being given unfair access to the country's resources and money at the expense of others. Negative representations of immigrants and resettled-refugees in mainstream society obscure the positive effect new comers have in revitalizing our economy, diversifying our culture, and contributing to our demographic growth.

The Internet

- The Internet is especially relevant in attacks carried out over the last ten years. It is the optimal site for radicalization, first because of algorithms that push extremist content and disinformation, and second because it connects extremists globally. Although individual perpetrators are not formally connected to terrorist organizations, they are loosely affiliated through online forums and social media pages.
- The Internet is a site of radicalization that feeds on personal and political grievances and generate shared rage and desire for violence.
- The Internet poses a challenge for our government because it offers anonymity and unlimited access to white supremacy propaganda. Messages of extremist violence are widely available. Terrorists and terror-enablers use the internet to spread their manifestos and violent beliefs, and terrorists often reference previous attackers as their role models or aspirational figures.

The government is tackling the issue of access to objectionable material through legislation (for example, laws criminalizing the dissemination of videos of the March 15th attack). However, there remains challenges to addressing propaganda that may be not be as easy to identify (e.g. propaganda masquerading as Internet humour such as neo-Nazi memes).

The Terrorist Attack on the Christchurch Masjidain Fits the Pattern

- Brenton H. Tarrant is a 28-year-old male of European descent. He had an online presence, and used the Internet to espouse racist views. He was inspired by racist and white supremacy ideologies such as the Great Replacement Theory, and Generation Identity but was not formally affiliated or trained by any terrorist organization. He announced the threat by sending the manifesto to the New Zealand Prime Minister. The terrorist purchased the weapons legally, was over-armed and in tactical gear.

Recommendations for the New Zealand Government

Lone-wolf white supremacy attacks appear to have taken the world by surprise. After years of focusing on Islamist terrorism, it is clear that world governments need to address white supremacy terrorism as a national security threat.

New Zealand should be commended for doing the following:

- Labelling the attack a terrorist attack
- Regulating access to guns
- Reaching out to the Muslim community in New Zealand and affirming the pluralism that characterises New Zealand society

These are bold and practical responses which other countries have been reluctant to adopt. The United States often labels such attacks "hate crimes," and has yet to pass substantial gun laws. Other countries have not been able to adopt socially inclusive positions to combat white supremacy extremism. For instance, France's commitment to secularism often results in marginalization of minority communities and the amplification of intolerance toward French Muslims.

Nonetheless, more needs to be done in New Zealand. New Zealand is in a unique position; it can reflect on what other countries of similar demographic and cultural composition have done to fight this threat and adapt the responses to the New Zealand context. In the United States and Europe, the focus on the threat of Islamist terrorism has left security gaps which have been filled by white supremacy terrorism. Learning from the global context, the New Zealand government must recognize the profile of lone-wolf perpetrators and adjust its intelligence and security response to address the threat they pose to New Zealand.

- The New Zealand government should address the phenomenon through intelligence gathering on white supremacy groups and affiliates, especially online. Such groups offer hubs of radicalization and potential breeding ground for lone-wolf attacks. Gathering intelligence here has the potential to prevent future attacks.
- In addition, the New Zealand government must recognize that the abhorrent attack on the mosques in 2019 exists on a continuum of violent attacks that range from vandalism of places of worship, to harassment of ethnic minority communities, and targeted murder of civilians. Recognizing the extent of the problem gives us a clearer understanding of its parameters, its origins and causes, and ways to prevent it.

- Equally importantly, New Zealand must be proactive in protecting its democracy and cultural pluralism. The attack was an attack on New Zealand values of religious freedom, pluralism, and democracy. The above recommendations of intelligence gathering and updating our understanding of terrorism are necessary but are not sufficient. Also needed is a long-term culturally proactive approach to increase our resiliency in the face of this threat.
- Therefore, a government agenda that is focused on social inclusion is key here. Important is the continued affirmation of social and cultural diversity in New Zealand. Social inclusion policies must recognize that the Muslim community was deliberately targeted by this terrorist attack. The national huis are a successful example of this. In addition, we must also acknowledge that terrorism is not exclusive to one ideology (e.g. Islamic extremism). Terrorism exists along an ideological spectrum that includes right-wing and white supremacy ideologies.
- Strategies of inclusion must be geared at all New Zealand ethnic communities, including Pākehā/European Descent communities. Reaching out to Pākehā/European Descent communities can give the government a sense of contentment and discontentment that exist in these communities. Strategies of inclusion must also bridge the urban and rural divide in New Zealand and reach out to communities which may otherwise feel left out of the national conversation. Inclusion must occur culturally, as well as economically. Inclusion has to have an economic component so that New Zealand communities feel a shared investment in the society in which we live, and a strengthened sense of social solidarity that crosses lines of culture (e.g. Indigenous, European, Muslim, etc).

Selected Bibliography

Mark Hamm and Ramón Spaaij. *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2017.

Eric Madiffs. "Triple Entitlement and Homicidal Anger: An Exploration of the Intersectional Identities of American Mass Murderers." *Men and Masculinities*. 2014, 17:1, 67-86.

Jude McCulloch, Sandra Walklate, Jane Maree Maher, Kate Fitz-Gibbon, and Jasmine McGowan. "Lone Wolf Terrorism through a Gendered Lens: Men Turning Violent or Violent Men Behaving Violently?" *Critical Criminology*. 2019, 27 437-450.

Laura Naeglar and Sara Salman. "Cultural Criminology and Gender Consciousness: Moving Feminist Theory from Margin to Center." *Feminist Criminology*. 2016, 11 (4) 354-374.

Jock Young. *Vertigo of Late Modernity*. London: Sage Publication. 2007.