

Panel 1: Terrorism Challenges – The Dynamic Nature of the Terrorism and Violent Extremism Risk

Terrorism – a Contextual Note

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“.....it was inevitable it was going to happen, which wolf in sheep’s clothing it was going to be was anyone’s guess but ... certainly, we were long overdue for it and we had many discussions, that what better target would there be than the multicultural, welcoming, happy go lucky place New Zealand is, isolated from everybody else, at the bottom of the world. If anybody wanted to make a statement, then this would be the place to make it.”

Former Special Investigations Group (SIG) Detective, interview with the author, April 2019

Introduction

It is not unusual being proximate to a traumatic terrorism event for it to be considered as the defining lens through which everything terrorism-related is subsequently seen. The period between the beginning of the modern era of terrorism in 1968, and 2001, is an eroded memory in New Zealand; and the nearly twenty years between 11 September 2001 and 15 March 2019 is now dwindling in our consciousness. This proximity bias is causing New Zealanders to become less concerned with terrorism elsewhere, with barely a murmur of condemnation coming from New Zealand of the attacks in Hanau, Paris, Nice and Vienna in 2020.¹ Nor do we seem to care much about recent terrorist attacks in the Philippines and Indonesia, geographically much closer to us than Europe, but which are seldom even reported in our media.²

Throughout the 2010s leaderless, lone actor, DIY, cyber-evoked, one-time terrorism became an international reality, and those informed about, or working in, our security sector saw the evaporation of geographical distance as a factor inhibiting it from occurring here. They would often say, ‘it’s not if but when,’ or ‘it’s only a matter of time before it happens here.’ Security sector practitioners across several agencies interviewed in 2018 consistently spoke of the risk they saw emerging, but also of the impossibility of convincing politicians, bureaucrats and New Zealanders generally, that terrorism could happen here. There is a risk of New Zealand seemingly ignoring terrorism elsewhere, of failing to broadly appreciate the era of modern terrorism, and of ignoring our own history of lone actors, intermittent, unconnected and motivated by different causes. By allowing 15 March 2019 to be a sole defining focus, we will find ourselves at best – much better prepared for the last incident, and somewhat less prepared for the next one.

¹ John Battersby, “Do New Zealander’s only care about terrorism if it happens to us,” Stuff.co.nz, 9 November 2020, available at <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/123320846/do-new-zealanders-only-care-about-terrorism-if-it-happens-to-us>

² See “Germany shooting: ‘Far-right extremist’ carried out shisha bars attacks,” 20 February 2020, BBC World News, 20 February 2020, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51567971>; “Philippines: Twin explosions hit Jolo: killing at least 14,” BBC World News, 24 August 2020 available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53895450> Aisyah Llewellyn, Eko Rusdianto and Arif Budi Setyawan, “Indonesia on edge ahead of Easter after Church bombing,” 1 April 2021, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/1/indonesia-on-edge-ahead-of-easter-after-palm-sunday-attack>.

Definition

New Zealanders' long-standing disinterest in terrorism leads us to another problem – our ability to understand what *terrorism* is. There is no global consensus on this. Bruce Hoffman notes definitions that run into the hundreds as terrorism morphed to mean different things at different times throughout the last century.³ Richard Jackson has observed the definitional problem reaching the point where even scholars gave up trying to define it.⁴ In New Zealand we have a legal definition which has evoked criticism, embedded in a practically unusable Terrorism Suppression Act (TSA).⁵ The government has announced that it will remedy the TSA, and at last we grapple with a problem the world has had for a long time, which we have been content not to bother with.

Defining 'counter-terrorism' is much less discussed.⁶ Counter terrorism approaches are usually moulded to the terrorism type they react to, and involving military or police operations, intelligence, judicial process responses, negotiations with terrorist groups, political settlements, community or specialist rehabilitation programmes, cyber scanning, broader based counter narrative exercises, or policy approaches focused on perceived underlying causes of terrorism or on aspects of social or community cohesion. Various combinations of these have had greater or lesser measures of success.

Terrorism is a tactic which deliberately seeks to circumvent state counter-terrorism responses, or which aim to exploit assumptions of safety and security in a society. The existence of counter-terrorism agencies indicates awareness of security risks. But 'security' is the extraction of the maximum possible benefit from resources available to detectable threats in the endeavour to mitigate them. No human endeavour can ever guarantee that terrorism will not occur, or recur and yet that expectation that they will, or should, is reinforced simplistically by our media. A massive British security effort foiled hundreds of IRA plots during the Troubles – yet hundreds of attacks still happened.

Audrey Cronin argues the importance of focusing not just on causes of terrorism, but also on what approaches have historically caused terrorism to end.⁷ This can be an unpleasant experience. While isolated lone actors or representatives of vague abstract notions can be dealt with as criminals, those more embedded and supported terrorists have ended up with seats at negotiating tables, trading their violence for political gains. Jonathan Powell has observed "that governments of all political colours and in all countries repeatedly say they will never talk to terrorist groups and yet they nearly always do."⁸ Countering terrorism is necessarily a pragmatic business.

³ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press (1998, 2006), pp.13-44.

⁴ Richard Jackson, *An Argument for Terrorism*, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2:2 (2008), pp.25-38.

⁵ John Battersby, Rhys Ball & Nick Nelson, *New Zealand's Counter-terrorism Strategy: A Critical Assessment*, *National Security Journal*, 2:1 (2020), available at <https://nationalecurityjournal.nz/latest-issues-2021/new-zealands-counter-terrorism-strategy-a-critical-assessment/>. To be fair legal definitions are seldom unproblematic – see Ashley Carver & Connor Harrie, "Framing Terrorists in Canada: A Comparative Analysis of Two Shootings", *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, 2:1 (2017), pp.98-110.

⁶ Brigitte Nacos in her work deliberately focused on terrorism and counter terrorism, gives 40 pages to discussion on the meaning of 'terrorism', but nothing to the definition of counter terrorism. See Brigitte L. Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, 5th Ed., Routledge (New York & London, 2016), pp.

⁷ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, Princeton University Press (Princeton & Oxford, 2011).

⁸ Jonathan Powell, *Talking to Terrorists: How to end armed conflicts*, The Bodley Head (London, 2014), p.1.

The Era of Modern Terrorism

The 1970s is a critical period in the understanding of modern terrorism, giving rise to angry, socially mis-fitting, non-conforming, delusional, violent and extreme, anti-authority groups in the US and Europe. They were small in numbers but disruptive and deadly, they bombed corporations, military installations, court houses, police stations, murdered police officers – the Weather Underground even smuggled a bomb inside the Pentagon. The same period saw the emergence of the most sophisticated and deadly terrorist organisations of the twentieth century. The Abu Nidal Organisation (ANO) were responsible for attacks on civilian targets in Europe and the Middle East, and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) kept British and Northern Irish security elements entrenched for 30 years. For a few years in the mid-1970s even Australia and New Zealand had a small proportion of a tiny sect engaged in improvised terrorism, which despite being identified, under surveillance, and infiltrated, still pulled off the Sydney Hilton bombing in 1978 killing three people and injuring several others.⁹

The coinciding rapid availability of television in the 1970s, meant that terrorists were no longer just purveyors of localised and far-off discriminate violence, but could obtain voices on an international stage utilising a most powerful weapon - not guns, bombs or threats – but the media. The 1972 attack at the Munich Olympics beamed the actions of those terrorists around the globe, internationalising their cause and their tactic. There was a significant upsurge in aircraft hijackings, and hostage-taking, with terrorists trading the lives of their captives for concessions. Exploiting this new fear, opponents of French nuclear testing here threatened to hijack Air New Zealand flights bound for French Polynesia in the early 1970s.¹⁰

Caleb Carr described this period as one in which terrorists would seek to negotiate while pointing a gun, contrasting it with the fundamental change brought about by Al Qaeda as a move to “pulling the trigger without discussion.”¹¹ This period argued Walter Laqueur saw the genesis of a new terrorism – one driven by irrational fanaticism and using human volume as the symbolic target to demonstrate a state’s inability to provide security for its citizens, and to say to the West “your lives are as worthless to us, as ours are to you.”¹² Al Qaeda- inspired terrorism was felt across the globe. In the year 2000, a New Zealand Police investigation found evidence that individuals plotting a terror attack in Australia had been planning for it here in New Zealand.¹³

Scholars have since argued that much in this new terrorism was not new. The LTTE and Hezbollah developed suicide terrorism in the 1980s and the Real IRA committed mass killings the following decade. Isolated lone actors, or small groups, driven by emerging extremist motivations had attacked and killed in the US in the 1990s. An FBI investigator described Eric Rudolph, responsible for the Centennial Park bombing at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, as having borrowed “ideas from a lot

⁹ John Battersby, “Can Old Directions Inform Current Directions: Australia, New Zealand and Ananda Marga’s Trans-Tasman Terrorism, 1975-1978, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, (2019), available at <https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/doi/epub/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1575031?needAccess=true>. See also Rachel Landers, *Who Bombed the Hilton?* Newsouth (Sydney, 2016).

¹⁰ John Battersby, “The Ghost of New Zealand’s Past and Present,” *National Security Journal*, 1:1 (2019).

¹¹ Caleb Carr, *The Lessons of Terror: A History of Warfare Against Civilians – Why it Has Always Failed, and Why it Will Fail Again*. Little Brown (New York, 2002), p.16.

¹² Walter Laqueur, *The New Face of Terrorism*, *The Washington Quarterly* (1988), pp.169-178.

¹³ Paul J Smith, “Terrorists and Crime Bosses,” *Janes Intelligence Review*, 1 July 2001, available at <https://archive.globalpolicy.org/nations/sovereign/citizen/2001/0701fake.htm>.

of different places and formed his own personal ideology...The bombings really sprang from his own unique biases and prejudices.”¹⁴ This description could well equally apply to Brenton Tarrant.

Timothy McVeigh, and Anders Brevik represent the emergence of the extreme right; intermittent, un-centralised, un-led, uncoordinated terrorism, separated in time and place and fiendishly difficult to detect. El Salvadoran Cruz Leon agreed to bomb hotels in Havana in 1997 for money so he could be like Sylvester Stallone in the movie *The Specialist*, and win a girl like Sharon Stone.¹⁵ Illyich Ramirez Sanchez, better known as ‘Carlos the Jackal’ was the most famous mercenary terrorist of the twentieth century, despite a leftist upbringing and his pro-Palestinian expression, his ideology was unable to be determined by his own defence team when he faced trial for his crimes.¹⁶ Following his arrest in 1994, he is known to have said to journalists “Above all I am a family man.”¹⁷

Thanks to CNN, 24-hour news coverage sourced ever greater global audiences for terrorist acts, and amplified them by repetitive screening of single events, transforming a single momentary event in time – into an event stretched over days to satisfy an insatiable public appetite. Terrorism has always goaded the state, hoping for a disproportionate reaction. This intense media focus increased that over-reaction – lest governments appear to be going ‘soft on terrorism.’ This elevated the risk of a counter-terrorism reaction which ultimately further served terrorists’ interests, as arguably the War on Terror has done.

Finally, the creation of social media allows terrorist entities, including lone actors, to become perpetrator and journalist of their own horrific acts, unfettered by any restriction on what can be shown.

One further aspect of more recent iterations of terrorism is what an Australian CT Practitioner referred to as perpetrators of terrorism who are not really terrorists, but who are socially and mentally vulnerable, too easily caught up in the online propaganda afloat in cyber space. Being unable to cast themselves adrift, they are exploited by ideologically driven centres thousands of miles away and incited to do what they otherwise would not. This blurs the line between terrorist victim and terrorism perpetrator, prompting the need for state agency or community expertise in interventions designed to deradicalize and divert people out of extremist groups. This occurs successfully now across the globe and is an example that going “soft on terrorism” can in fact have positive results. It has been successfully done here and in Australia.

However, counter-terrorism strategies may, at best, have a limited rate of success. “We only have to be lucky once” went the IRA taunt after the Brighton Hotel bombing in 1984, revealing that terrorists could fail in the bulk of their endeavours, but still make a rare success look like a resounding victory for them and consummate failure for security agencies.¹⁸ Regardless of what states do, and regardless of what we may decide or advise should be done here in New Zealand into the 2020s, history should caution us to prepare for future non-detections, and even failures.

¹⁴ Eric Rudolph, nd. Available at <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/eric-rudolph>

¹⁵ Fernando Morais, *The Last Soldiers of the Cold War: The Story of the Cuban Five*. English Trans, Verso (London & New York, 2015), pp.131-146.

¹⁶ John Follain, *Jackal: The Complete Story of the Legendary Terrorist, Carlos the Jackal*, Arcade (New York, 1998), pp.266-267.

¹⁷ Hoffman, *Op. Cit.*, p.30.

¹⁸ “Heavily infiltrated ‘Real IRA’ needs to ‘get lucky’ only once,” *The Irish Times*, 29 January 2001, available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/heavily-infiltrated-real-ira-needs-to-get-lucky-only-once-1.273155>.

Conclusion (with a comment on the future)

This paper has set out to convey some understanding of the evolution of modern terrorism with a view to guide our future response to terrorism here. Terrorism has persisted within political systems for decades, yet still defies a clear and accepted definition. It has been meshed with notions of extremism, and violent extremism (themselves also definitionally problematic). It has probably changed less in itself, and more mirrored changes we have taken for granted. It has exploited state and society's vulnerabilities before we noticed they were there, as well as harnessing new technology as we have. We have in the past blindly accepted progress, the developers of which seldom think of what a criminal or terrorist can do with their new gadgets and concepts like television and social media. Terrorists from a plethora of often opposing causes consciously and unconsciously share tactical innovations. As we approach an era of driverless vehicles, and artificial intelligence, we should not miss the potential for these things to become the weapons of future terrorists, as they follow their traditional path of violent rejection of the status quo and look to circumvent whatever approaches are taken against them.