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Security sector practitioner perceptions of the terror threat environment before the Christchurch attacks

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ABSTRACT

On 15 March 2019, Brenton Tarrant destroyed New Zealand's perception of its low threat terrorist risk. Security sector practitioners interviewed for this study before 15 March spoke about the challenges of performing counter terrorism roles in that low threat environment. Their perceptions revealed a fear that terrorist attacks occurring overseas, would sooner or later occur in New Zealand. Their roles were complicated by an overarching sense of social, bureaucratic and political complacency toward the threat of terrorism. They perceived legislative inertia, which fettered the powers and resources agencies had to effectively act against the risks they believed were present. Despite these barriers, security sector agencies continued to look for possible emerging threats across a spectrum of risk, but relied on improvised use of existing legislation to manage it. This was more effective against those motivated by militant jihadism, and as Tarrant demonstrated, less so against other threats. Community engagement was needed and successfully achieved, although difficulties were observed which need to be addressed, and the media was perceived as having an undue influence over New Zealand's security priorities, highlighting the need for a national counter terrorism strategy.

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Introduction

The New Zealand Intelligence Community (NZIC) has a key responsibility for detecting terrorist threats, alongside a range of other traditional and emerging risks, as well as the vetting of state employees across the security sector. A number of other New Zealand government agencies including Aviation Security Service (AVSEC), Customs Service, Department of Corrections, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), Police and the Defence Force (NZDF) all have small elements of their organisations dedicated to investigating, analysing or monitoring aspects of terrorism risk to New Zealand. Prior to the 15 March, these elements were generally peripheral to the core work their organisations were involved with. New Zealand's national terrorism threat level was set as 'low' (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

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2017), although occasionally insiders publicly questioned if this was an accurate assessment (Broad 2017). Drawing from Sam Mullins' (2016) work looking at Australian CT practitioner perspectives, this study set out to discover the nature of New Zealand practitioner perspectives across the various government agencies for which CT was a concern, and consider the impact on them of the 'low threat' environment they operated in. While there are several studies concerning general aspects of New Zealand's national security, counter terrorism has attracted much less attention (Greener-Barcham 2002; Ip 2016; Battersby 2017, 2018; Battersby and Ball 2019) and nothing yet has focused on practitioner's perspectives of the work they do. This article seeks to address that gap.

For this study a series of Interviews were undertaken with security sector practitioners including 'front-line' operators, analysts, and middle to senior managers. These interviews commenced in February 2018 and aimed to record perceptions of terrorist risk to New Zealand and the obstacles practitioners faced in response to it. By the time Brenton Tarrant carried out his attacks on 15 March 2019, and destroyed the previously perceived low threat environment prevailing before that time, 12 interviews had taken place. These interviews revealed a fear among practitioners that the terrorist attacks that had been occurring overseas, would sooner or later occur in New Zealand. Despite this concern, there appeared to be an overarching sense of social, bureaucratic and political complacency toward the threat of terrorism. This complacency was perceived to cause legislative inertia, adversely affecting the powers agencies had, and interviewees also generally regarded their workgroups as under-resourced. Despite these barriers, security sector agencies continued to look for possible emerging threats across a spectrum of risk from Left to Right Wing, Militant Jihadism, single-issue related activism and fixated offenders.

Militant jihadism has dominated media coverage of the global terrorism landscape for most of the twenty-first century – largely the result of Al Qaeda's and then ISIS's influence, which was also felt in New Zealand. But while a prevailing focus, it was not the sole focus of New Zealand's security sector, and practitioners pointed to a range of factors contributing to various individuals' involvement in activity across a spectrum of risk. New Zealand's limited terrorist legislation allowed them the ability to improvise against jihadist threats, but less so against others. Security sector engagement with Muslim communities was seen as essential to assist with mitigating a small number of individuals motivated by ISIS propaganda on the internet, expressing the desire to travel to warzones outside New Zealand, or to attack New Zealanders at home. These relationships with Muslim communities were seen as successful, avoiding the effect of 'suspect communities' that overseas approaches had been accused of (Thomas 2010; Spalek 2016; Faure Walker 2019; Morris 2019). Cherney and Hartley (2017) have observed 'police/community partnerships in counter-terrorism are difficult to sustain and often fraught with tension'. Interviewees regarded their contacts with community groups as largely successful, but did question if contact was with the appropriate levels in community groups, and spoke about the difficulties of dealing with them. Finally, the media was extensively discussed by practitioners as a volatile influence, prone to superficial and sensational reporting of events, and seen as exerting an unduly large influence over public opinion and government action. That media influence appears to have had a definite impact on the risk assessments of the security sector itself, a concern they appeared aware of but were unable to change.

Approach

Individuals from among the organisations listed above were approached and asked if they would consent to be interviewed for this study. Interviews were anonymous and granted on the condition that the organisation they were from would not be identified, and no sensitive or classified topics would be discussed. Where interviewees have been quoted or referenced, a random identifier (Practitioner P, Practitioner Q, etc), has been allocated to preserve their anonymity, and where references were inadvertently made to their role or place of work, they have been omitted from the quoted text. The interviews were semi-structured, and interviewees were asked about the risks they perceived, the environment they worked in and the obstacles that existed in mitigating them. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and analysed for the themes that emerged in the responses. These themes as outlined in the introduction were, (1) expectations of threat amid an environment of general complacency, (2) the existence of legislative and resource barriers, (3) the presence of a spectrum of risk, (4) the importance and challenge of community and engagement and finally (5) a disproportionate influence of the media on perceptions of terrorist risk in New Zealand. These topics will be dealt with below. The purpose of this article is to shed light on practitioner perceptions of various aspects of domestic terrorist risk – this article does not attempt to quantify that risk. Finally, those interviewed variously recalled experiences extending back to the mid-1990s and up until a month before the Christchurch attacks. Just over half those interviewed were still in security sector roles, the remainder were formerly practitioners.

General complacency – the Phantom Menace

Security sector practitioners spoken to were distinctly aware that there was a risk of a terrorist attack in New Zealand, but they described it as a struggle to convince the wider public service or politicians that this was a legitimate concern. The security sector could warn of a possible threat, based on vulnerabilities that existed and on events occurring overseas, but that was often insufficient grounds to persuade other public service and political actors of the need to give the possibility of terrorism occurring in New Zealand serious consideration. Practitioner P described it as impossible to demonstrate the need to prepare for, or take action necessary to deter, a possible threat ‘when you’re actually arguing the counterfactual’. ‘Because we don’t see any visible threat, or because we have not had any realised on-shore or _____ incident of any great weight, it gets very difficult.’ Practitioner Q was more direct in asserting that unless there was a terrorist event in New Zealand, the need to prepare for one would be an uphill battle. ‘I think New Zealand is a low threat environment, and there isn’t really a lot of will to grapple with it until people are really forced to.’ They went on to explain the complexity of the ‘low threat environment’:

We are trying to operate in a space where we haven’t yet had the incident. It’s very hard and a lot of people will rather avoid it, or you [sic they] under play it. They don’t know what’s at stake. And I think what’s at stake is our ability to stay the way we are. Because if we look at all of our partners they’ve changed because of terrorism. And they’re still changing The National Security System is quite boastful about supposedly having a clear-eyed view of risk and taking proactive action. I don’t think it does.

Since 9/11 the evolution and development of modern terrorism has shown that geography, weapons or explosives, coordinated intelligence gathering and planning have all become much lesser obstacles for terrorists. They have overcome them by harnessing the internet, resorting to improvised attack methods, using home-made explosives or ubiquitous items as weapons, and have virtually foregone centralised planning in favour of provoking spontaneous autonomous actors. In the face of these developments New Zealand's geographical isolation evaporated as an obstacle to terrorism some time ago. This became starkly obvious with the attacks in Christchurch on 15 March 2019. Prior to these attacks however, security practitioners noted, that New Zealanders continued to believe overseas developments in terrorism did not hold any necessary implications for them and geography was still a key contributor to this assumption. When discussing the common beliefs of most New Zealanders Practitioner P described the 'low threat environment' as meaning '*that [terrorism] happens over there, that would never happen here, we are lying in the middle of the Pacific*', and Practitioner O noted 'things that happened in Europe and France and Canada are a long, long way away ...'

Practitioner X observed that while appreciation of the potential risk of terrorism was clear within specialist areas that were specifically concerned with national security, outside of those workgroups – even within security sector organisations themselves – considerable complacency existed. Practitioner X described a routine training situation in which participants

were moaning because ... every participant had to wear a [name] tag around because, you know, *they think there's going to be a terrorist attack, or we are going to be attacked and an arsenal of guns are going to be taken overhahaha. It's never going to happen here, so that I think that attitude is throughout the country, even the guys with _____ still think nothing's going to happen, [it's] very complacent, I think, in general.*

This general perception of isolation, and the assumption that terrorism was not a genuine threat, led to a deeply ingrained problem for the security sector – not only how to go about detecting any emerging threat that they perceived, but how to put in place measures that would be necessary to prevent such a threat developing. Practitioner C explained that:

the public's perception of New Zealand's CT environment is also a challenge, the general sense is that there is nothing to see here. So how do you prepare a nation that hasn't been communicated with by government agencies, that hasn't got an appreciation of the risk that exists albeit to a lesser volume than what we see in the Five Eyes countries. How do you do that? How do you initiate the conversation without scaring the nation?

In separate studies Johanson (2017) and Rothery (2019) have critiqued New Zealand's National Security System. Both note its reactive features, essentially waiting for crises to occur and then organising a response to them. Rothery observes the absence of a national counter terrorism strategy. This generally reactive approach clearly had an impact on those working to negate the possibility of terrorism in New Zealand. Practitioners had a strong sense that their efforts to articulate the terrorist risk that they perceived existed were ultimately forlorn. The fact that no major twenty-first century terrorist event had occurred in New Zealand was taken as evidence across the wider public sector, and broadly across New Zealand society, that no such risk existed and this in turn led to a fundamental resistance to taking any significant steps to prepare for, counter, or prevent a terrorist threat.

Legislative inertia

New Zealand's Terrorist Suppression Act (TSA) 2002 has been regarded by security sector practitioners as largely ineffective since the Solicitor General David Collins declined authorisation to prosecute several individuals arrested during the Operation Eight actions against activists alleged to have been running 'militant training' camps in the Urewera in 2007. Key faults of the TSA include its convoluted definitions of 'a terrorist act' and 'a terrorist group' as well as the applicability of the TSA to suspected conspiracies to carry out a terrorist attack if discovered before it occurred (Battersby and Ball 2019). In 2009 Collins explained his view that in Operation Eight, the NZ Police had 'successfully brought to an end what were very disturbing activities' and that deficiencies in the law had been a key component of the decision not to charge despite the fact that a number of those arrested had come close to meeting the criteria for prosecution. However, he explained:

The fundamental problem is that the legislation focuses upon an entity that carries out a terrorist act, and if individuals are actually developing towards ... carrying out a terrorist act, they aren't yet an entity that is carrying out a terrorist act, and so there is a tautology in the legislation which is extremely difficult to unravel. (Dominion Post 2009)

The TSA was referred to the Law Commission for review, but this was stopped in 2012 – described as not a high priority of the then National Government (Dudding 2013). The TSA has been amended occasionally to meet the minimum requirements of UN Security Council resolutions, but nothing has been done to amend its fundamental flaws (Battersby 2017). Among practitioners interviewed, there was broad agreement that the TSA was ineffective as a counter terrorism framework, and that it required review and remedy. But gaining momentum for change within bureaucratic circles was sluggish. Practitioner C observed:

Legislation and policy is difficult to amend in response to an incident, let alone when the perception is that there is nothing to see here It's clear that the Solicitor General has previously said it's not fit for purpose so review is required. To get impetus to make change amongst those who hold the pen, principally _____ and the like has been really challenging. It's taken 18 months to finally get some go-ahead, albeit it's relatively glacial.

Despite this perception that some movement was likely toward addressing the deficiencies of the TSA, no meaningful change had occurred at the time of writing.

The result of operating in a security environment in which the TSA is seen as deficient is that standard and common criminal offences have had to be utilised as an improvised 'catch all' to deal with issues that a flawed TSA cannot.

The key thing for us here in _____ is the legislation. We are still having to fit Crimes Act and other Acts into what these people are doing, whereas overseas, Australia for example, they are light years ahead of us ... obviously a lot more has happened there than has happened here, so that's the main thing, the legislation, we need to evolve a little bit quicker, get in front of the game. (Practitioner X)

This lack of understanding of threat was observed by another interviewee as directly translating to a lack of political will to do anything to increase it:

But if we think about it, what has happened in New Zealand counter terrorism in recent years? Arguably, very little. There were a few little changes made to the TSA by the

former government, largely around making it easier to hold, to cancel a few passports and to try and keep us in step with some other countries around, not letting the flow of fighters take place ... but if you look at what those changes were, there was an awful lot of political capital burned up to do very, very little, because it was things like lengthening the time required before you had to reconfirm that you were going to deny them a passport, so actually it just made things bureaucratically less arduous from one specific perspective, [but] it didn't do anything to really enable counter terrorism. (Practitioner Q)

The Countering Terrorist Fighters Legislation (CTFL) Bill referred to by Practitioner Q was enacted in 2015 to comply with UNSC Resolution 2178 of September 2014 (Ip 2016). The CFTL Bill amended the existing Security Intelligence Service and Immigration Acts. These amendments allowed for limited additional powers and time periods for urgent surveillance without warrant and Ministerial authority for the suspension of passports for those believed to be intending to leave to fight with terrorist entities overseas. The CFTL Bill was temporary, its sunset clause timed to coincide with the new Intelligence and Security Act (ISA) 2017 coming into effect. However an oversight in the drafting of the Bill left a six-month gap between expiry of the CTFL Bill amendments on 1 April 2017 and the commencement of the ISA in September that year. When NZSIS Director Rebecca Kitteridge brought the error to the attention of the Minister in Charge of the NZSIS Chris Finlayson, his response was 'You will not be seeking a legislative solution AT ALL. Don't even bother asking' (Walters 2018). When the error was made public in 2018, Finlayson was no longer the Minister, and reportedly stated that

the legal blunder was the fault of the spy agency or DPMC, not himself, and if there had been a terrorist attack during that time, it would have been the fault of the security officials who he believed failed to spot the issue. (Walters 2018)

This example underscores the lack of legislative urgency from the Key National Government relating to terrorism. The officials' oversight was careless, but inadvertent. The flat refusal to remedy the omission on the part of the Minister was deliberate and his transfer of blame would have been little comfort had a terrorist event occurred in the interim. Finlayson's dismissiveness underscores the practitioner perception of a lack of political urgency concerning the potential for domestic terrorist threats in New Zealand prior to 15 March 2019.

Resourcing counter terrorism

The general assumption of no genuine threat, and the inadequacy of legislation was seen by practitioners as translating directly to the allocation of resources to countering terrorism. Practitioner U judged the importance of CT in their organisation as minimal based on the size of the staff allocated to deal with it. Within many other security sector agencies, CT formed a tiny fraction of these organisations, and consequently attracted little funding.

For _____ this is zero point one percent of our work As a whole this is a drop in the bucket. The perspective of it at a senior level [is that] it is a very important piece of work, but still it's zero point one percent of our resource and effort and time. (Practitioner P)

At the end of 2001/02 government financial year (30 June 2002), when intelligence agencies around the world ballooned in response to the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US, New Zealand's SIS had only 111 staff, an increase of 11 on the previous year

(NZSIS 2002). In 2002, in the wake of the Bali bombings, NZSIS staff reached 132 (NZSIS 2003). In 2013 – the last year that annual reports mentioned staffing, NZSIS had reached the dizzying number of 213 staff, with a turnover of 20% (NZSIS 2013). This is despite noted increases in NZSIS budget over the period, and estimates currently which place combined NZSIS and Government Communications Security Bureau staff numbers at around 700 (Rogers 2017). Practitioners able to comment have not been referenced here, to protect their identity. One described the NZSIS as previously ‘very thinly resourced’ with only about one-fifth of its staff being Case Officers or Desk Officers who were actively involved in monitoring or analysing domestic risks. Another mentioned in their time with NZSIS, that less than half of the organisation was involved in ‘Case Officer or Desk Officer roles, electronic technical support and active surveillance.’ The primary purpose of NZSIS is the assessment of national security risk including terrorism among a range of other concerns. NZSIS staff numbers are now significantly greater than previously, and those interviewed were no longer employed by them, so the currency of their observations may be doubtful here. However, the proportionate allocation of staff to various tasks is unlikely to have changed, and NZSIS are not the lead agency for terrorism under New Zealand’s national security system. This role falls to NZ Police (Rothery 2019). For all other agencies involved in law enforcement, border security, customs and corrections, terrorism risk was only a small part of their much broader responsibilities and most, prior to 15 March 2019, had only a handful of staff assigned to CT roles. The New Zealand Police (the lead agency for terrorism), were severely constrained under the Key Government by an extended period of ‘flat’ budgets for years following the Global Financial Crisis, and resources committed to its Special Investigations Group (reformed in 2016 to the National Security Group) were minimal (Battersby 2018).

The perception of inadequate powers and too few resources committed to the detection of possible terrorist threats led to practitioners improvising solutions to minimise suspected risk. For suspect individuals mitigation most often took the form of ‘soft’ interventions aiming to divert these individuals from violent intent or more direct warnings of the consequences of their actions (Practitioner Z). Such warnings given by NZSIS were stopped in 2014 after the Inspector General of Intelligence questioned their legality, and were resumed a few years later, but under strict guidelines (Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security 2017). In cases where evidence of offending was available police also utilised warnings, or criminal investigations could be undertaken and prosecutions followed if appropriate (Battersby and Ball 2019). A small number of ‘fixated’ individuals who have made threats or undertook threatening actions against political leaders have been prosecuted and convicted of criminal offences (NZ Herald 2007; RNZ 2019 May 26). In recent times, most prosecutions have involved breaches of the Video, Film and Publications Classification Act 1993, where offenders have been caught with video or hard copy banned by the Chief Censor (Battersby 2019). This prompted Practitioner Z to observe that the Video, Film and Publications Classification Act has been New Zealand’s only effective counter terrorism legislation since 9/11.

The spectrum of perceived threat

The international predominance of ISIS and their sophisticated production and dissemination of high-quality video and hard copy propaganda material, along with claiming

responsibility for several high profile terror attacks overseas meant that militant jihadism was a predominant area of concern in several countries, including New Zealand. Magazine-style publications such as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* were produced regularly by ISIS and made available on-line, as were videos with graphically violent content, often filmed as executions, mutilations, and open conflict were occurring. Such publications clearly breached the Video, Film and Publications Classification Act and were banned by the Chief Censor. These jihadist publications have been accessed and disseminated by some individuals in New Zealand resulting in a small number of arrests for breaching the Act (Battersby and Ball 2019).

Militant Jihadism was inevitably a key focus of New Zealand's security sector over the last few years, however, when asked about the threats they were looking for, practitioners conveyed concern over a spectrum of extremist activity. Practitioner F stated his organisation looked for 'Right Wing, Left Wing and Religious Extremism', and Practitioner O referred to risks emerging from Al Qaeda, ISIS, Right Wing Extremism (RWE), environmental activism and disaffected individuals.

Practitioners often noted certain traits that recurred in at-risk individuals regardless of their particular extremist viewpoint. Mental health conditions and 'fixations' featured prominently as a major source of concern. Practitioner Z explained

our focus here is actually on identifying those showing signs of violent extremism and countering that violent extremism before it actually either motivates an individual to do a terrorist act, or that individual motivates someone else by means of spreading the ideology to commit a terrorist act. And we're conscious that mental health is showing up more and more, particularly Aspergers and Autism spectrum throughout those who are showing signs of violent extremism. So the context in New Zealand is [that] predominantly we are seeing those aged mid-20s and below, people coming from dysfunctional families, people having mental health and Autism or Aspergers type conditions, and our _____ has been on identifying those people and actually putting processes in place that will reduce their violent extremism, and hopefully return them to being productive members of society.

Practitioner X generally felt that much of the risk was unpredictable and widely spread. He reflected that

There are people here who are of great concern, if there is an attack here, will it be a jihadi, will it be a Muslim male? I don't know. I think it is going to be an Acutely Disaffected Person, maybe mentally disabled, or mentally affected, who may do something in the name of Allah but who probably isn't a true blue Islamic believer, it's very difficult obviously. But given [that] all you need to do is pick up a knife out of the drawer or jump into a car and drive it the wrong way down the road. You know, it doesn't take much.

Further to perceptions of the vulnerabilities of the mentally ill and fixated individuals was the heightened risk that cyber space posed. Practitioner P referred to the 'amplification chamber that the internet is that unduly magnifies what otherwise would be pretty harmless thoughts'. Practitioner Q described the de-centralised nature of terrorism, perceived to have been largely a result of the internet, and that it was manifest in New Zealand:

let's take the classic example around Islamic State, but you could also extend this to Far Right groups now, and others; someone does something, they have no real connection to mission control, they've just read some stuff on-line, they say they did it in the name of Islamic State or a certain terrorist group here, you don't know if there is anybody else, because they're not necessarily connected to anybody else. It's just highlighted the fact that there could be more

people, and it could happen anytime, anywhere. It's very much harder to constrain that now in the internet age, and what we're seeing is ... there's a population group here that's being harnessed for something that they weren't being harnessed for before. We have people in that population group just like everybody else. The risk is there. It's not as great as it is in some other places I don't think, but the risk is there and we are going to have to handle it.

Practitioner P considered New Zealand's domestic risk resided much more in a difficult to define grouping of 'survivalist/Right Wing', individuals and 'fervent gun owners'. He expressed caution about presuming that they all fell into the same group. He noted

there are certainly people in New Zealand, without a doubt, who concern me, and they often do have access to very high powered firearms, so their capability is high, that's what worries me much more than our [militant Jihadi] CT targets here ...

He described these 'CT targets' as 'disaffected' but complex.

They are not necessarily criminal, but they're certainly not, typically, otherwise well adjusted. ... In terms of general characteristics I think it would be fair to say, apart from being male, mostly, they don't fall into any nice compartments. We have a mix, so there's often internationally a focus on migrants, I don't think that would be fair to do in New Zealand – yes some are, but definitely not all. Certainly a number of them that are 'reverts', and 'revert' being an interesting term – so we would call converts to Islam, that they would have to be a relatively high percentage, not particularly well integrated within the Muslim community, and often not really a member of the Muslim community ...

Community engagement

With the occurrence of individuals inspired by on-line militant jihadism and the emergence of internet-based iterations of extremist Islamic theology, security sector agencies have reached-out to Muslim communities for information, aid and guidance. This was especially the case where instances of mental health and other social and religious factors began to feature in individual cases, and socially based 'wrap around' interventions were considered an appropriate mitigation. These approaches occurred instead of arrest and prosecutions, or in some cases after arrest, and have been incorporated in sentencing (Clarkson 2018).

Many security sector-led community initiatives in other countries have met with mixed success – the notion of 'suspect communities' developing where state agencies have sought to consult with community leaders, or focus on counter-terrorism programmes in their communities (Thomas 2010; Cherney and Hartley 2017). The challenge exists in New Zealand as it does elsewhere, balancing the relationship between the security sector and community groups in respect of contemporary terrorist risks.

Practitioners were asked to comment on how they perceived their organisation's relationship with Muslim communities in a terrorist risk context. The answers varied depending on the nature of their engagement with Muslim communities. Senior members tended to express more confidence than middle rank or front line members. Most practitioners observed that there was less a singular Muslim community in New Zealand but more 'communities' and that interactions had benefits and challenges. For example, Practitioner C, in a national leadership role, noted:

the engagement that my staff have had in the field with mosques, with senior leaders within those communities has been extremely positive. They have been extremely helpful, they have not hindered our activities at all ... We are able to pick up the phone and call leaders of

mosques, have quite frank conversations with them and retain the positive relationships with them that we enjoy. That's a really good positive relationship.

Practitioner O, in a senior role of a different organisation spoke confidently of the relationship, but as the interview progressed he identified a more common difficulty mentioned by most others – while 'the Muslim community' looked homogenous from a distance, close up it was not and dealing with the many nationalities, cultures, and branches of Islam was a complex undertaking which posed substantial challenges:

I think by and large it's been really positive and extremely useful ... The challenge is obviously that the community is so fractured and it depends on which day and who you speak to about whatever you'll get a different answer. But by and large the more established, more conservative and more mainstream elements have been really, really good to deal with. And that's really positive. Young ones, I think, treat the whole of government with a great deal more suspicion, that just maybe their age or their demographics, but, again there are inroads being made there too and it's keeping those doors open and keeping that dialogue going, if you like, even if it's not good dialogue, at least we know who to speak to and vice versa.

Practitioner P, described Muslim communities as 'quite split' but generally invested in living a peaceful lifestyle and good to work with. He noted feedback from some Muslim people that 'the _____ was spying on them'. He conceded 'that may or may not be true' but noted that the Bill of Rights and limited resources were clear constraints on security sector action. 'We know from _____ that people misperceived what we do all the time, and therefore, I suspect ... people are misperceiving what the _____ are doing all the time.' Practitioner P continued:

we have actually forged good relationships at a high level, but that's not necessarily the same thing as forging it with the people who are on the ground. So we might be dealing with _____, for instance, really well, but actually _____ may not be a good representation of the community as a whole or in particular the people who we need to be engaging around this issue. That's certainly a common feedback that I've heard.

Practitioner X was at the coal face of community interaction. He was more direct about the problems encountered, but observed that in any dealing with any community, these types of issues are likely to emerge.

they keep to themselves. They want to impress upon New Zealand ... that they're complying with living here, they don't want any trouble, they don't want to put their head above the parapet, they just want to get on with things, and live life with the least amount of trouble as possible.

Having said that we have had some successes in dealing with people, we've gained their trust. Their Islamic belief, the Quran says not to tell on your neighbour or on your brother, so it's very difficult for them, but we have been able to reach out to about half a dozen senior members of the community, and all in all they're very good to deal with.

Practitioner T in a similar position found interaction with various communities required considerable tact, as not only were communities diverse, they did not always see eye to eye;

they come from very different places and there can be tensions there. New Zealand converts do not always fit in, they may have adopted the religion, but the whole cultural element is missing and being accepted – which on the face of it is automatic – in reality that's not always the case.

New Zealand has not experienced the ISIS inspired terrorism that many other countries have, and has not seen a need for the relatively high profile strategies, such as the UK's PREVENT, which have resulted in unforeseen and unwanted outcomes (Thomas 2010). Within New Zealand, security sector approaches to communities have been made to assist with the detection of possible threats – and there has been criticism of the NZSIS 'out-reach' programme by the Human Rights Foundation (Pennington 2019). The interviewees' comments revealed a perceived complexity existing with the nature of security sector-community relationships and saw the cultural diversity and different outlooks of New Zealand's Muslim communities as a challenge. They recognised that contacts with community leadership may not translate to effective ground-level contacts, and that there were generational differences in the willingness to work with state agencies. Practitioners were aware that those individuals adopting militant jihadism from internet sources may not be well integrated into local communities, or they were not Muslim at all – but after engaging with on-line propaganda had converted to an extremism in its name. Overall, engagement with communities to mitigate the risk of a terrorist threat was seen as positive and valuable despite the barriers identified but sufficient was revealed to be wary of complacency and some fine tuning of existing relationships is required.

A great friend and a terrible enemy

'The Media are like fire, they're a great friend but a terrible enemy', observed Practitioner O when asked about the influence the media had on perceptions of national security risk. Practitioner C gave an almost identical answer – 'you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't ... they can be your best ally, or your greatest foe'. The seniority of these two practitioners placed them in positions of engagement with the media, which varied, at times seeking media assistance and at others resisting intrusive and unwanted interest. This media engagement often focused on providing accounts of events which were sometimes reported, but at others ignored or criticised. One of these senior practitioners commented: 'It is what it is', but either way the media could not be ignored – 'you really need to leverage the relationships you have with the media as best you possibly can (Practitioner C)'.

At levels at which there was no media interaction, security sector practitioners were more consistently critical especially if they were in roles where the product of their work was likely to feature in the media. An inability to respond to media criticism caused frustration. Practitioner U described the media as 'biased' 'lazy' and 'socially irresponsible'. Practitioner X began with the observation that 'the media do a pretty terrible job in general' and 'the media is entertainment isn't it, more than anything? It's not balanced, it's not factual, it's a fucking joke in this country'.

The media's perceived sensationalism was particularly disliked by 'frontline' practitioners, and the tendency to immediately pounce on anything related to terrorism domestically was criticised:

The case in _____ last week, as soon as the terrorist handbook was mentioned ... the media just went ballistic. The T-word sells papers ... you go back as far as Operation Eight, you know if you mention the Terrorism Suppression Act, anything with the T-word in it. I guess it pulls on the heart-strings, if people think they're potentially vulnerable. (Practitioner Z)

The reactions of two other practitioners were more reserved – their work did not come under direct public scrutiny, and their analytical roles appear to have led to more considered reactions to the media. When asked about what contributed to their perception of terrorist risk, the first of these practitioners identified the media as a primary influencer:

‘Perception’ of risk appears to be a predominant aspect ... it’s almost what people seem to be scared of becomes a national security risk.

[Question] which people?

I want to say the public ... unfortunately we talk about the public, but most of the time we’re actually talking about the media because we’re usually only getting what the media report the public are concerned about and there’s this idea about public perception and public ground swell but in fact, it is actually, typically what is reported by the media as opposed to what the public really think.

[Question] OK ... it is almost as if you see the media are controlling the perception of risk?

I think to a degree they have at the moment, yes. ... You know, my cynical side I’d say they have a pervasive control over that, over the ‘perception’ of risk, and what’s important and what’s not. (Practitioner P)

Practitioner Q spoke about what the reaction was likely to be if a terrorist event occurred in New Zealand, and central to their description was the role the media would play in it;

... the script is going to go something along the lines of the police and security services will be reviewing their practices to see whether or not anything could have been done, and we also need to make sure those bodies have the powers and resources they need to prevent this kind of thing in the future ... It’s a script, and we’ve seen it used again and again and again overseas, and there is no reason to think it wouldn’t be used here ...

In subsequent comment on the media, Practitioner Q continued describing a hypothetical terrorist lone actor:

It’s very easy to question, who was this person? Did agencies know who they were? Could anything have been done to stop them? What are you going to do now? You can’t do nothing ... It’s actually easy, anybody could ask those questions, you don’t need to have a deep appreciation of terrorism and extremism and things like that. The newsworthy angles are, you know, how are you going to respond to this challenge? Are we safe? Is there anyone else? You know it’s all very easy to throw those sorts of questions out. And we get into that fundamental issue about the sense of security which is very hard to maintain, and anything happens here, rightly or wrongly, some of the media will link it to occurrences overseas and you can see the headlines – ‘Terrorism comes to New Zealand’.

Descriptions of the media by security sector practitioners were generally critical, more so by those whose work could be subject to media scrutiny, and to which practitioners saw themselves as having no ‘right of reply’. The media’s accounts of certain events were seen as simplistic, lazy and conveying little understanding of the depth of the topics they reported on. The perception of ‘media scripting’ even suggested the media was seen to be less reporting what was happening, and more reporting a sequence of events they knew would appeal to their audience. Overall practitioners were unconvinced of the reliability of the media.

However, the comparison with ‘fire’ and the need to ‘leverage influence’ reflected that the media was seen as a potent influencer over public and political perception and while

they criticized the media for this, the security sector nevertheless seemed to be as prone to following the media's lead, as were their political superiors.

Practitioner P's observation that the media had a pervasive control over the perception of risk prompts two possibilities – in the absence of a comprehensive counter terrorism strategy – the media were effectively setting key counter terrorism priorities for New Zealand and New Zealand's political and security sector leaders were allowing them to do so. Judging from their responses, the practitioners at least would be likely to agree with the latter proposition, and while they would regard this as a serious concern, they appear equally unable to do anything to change it.

Conclusion

This study has focused on security sector practitioners in counter terrorism roles operating in the pre-15 March 2019 'low threat' environment and aimed to discover and report how they viewed their role and the obstacles they faced. Practitioners revealed a significant challenge to monitor, detect, and mitigate terrorism risk in an environment in which a strong societal and bureaucratic complacency existed – and an overarching disbelief that terrorism occurring overseas would ever actually happen in New Zealand. This complacency was seen as resulting in limited resources committed to countering or preventing terrorism and stifling legislative development that practitioners considered necessary to be effective. This perception was exhibited at all levels and was reinforced by David Collins, Solicitor General 2006-2012, who was clearly critical of the TSA, at least twice asserting publicly that the wording of the Act was problematic. In 2019 Brenton Tarrant was charged with committing a terrorist act, underscoring the fact that the TSA remains unusable as a counter terrorism enabler – it has been used for the first time only after 100 people had been killed or wounded in Christchurch. It has yet to be established that the charge will result in a successful conviction.

In the absence of effective counter terrorism legislation, practitioners have been compelled to improvise with existing legislation to control those few who exhibited signs of active intent to emulate overseas acts. This improvisation has relied heavily on the Film, Video and Publication Classification Act, an option which was available as long as a terrorist entity such as ISIS produced graphically obscene publications and video content. It remains largely ineffective against RWE or other socially or politically violent movements which do not publish material in the manner that ISIS has done previously.

It is clear that jihadist oriented risk was a prominent security sector concern, driven partly by international media focus on Al Qaeda and ISIS. Beyond this however, a spectrum of risk was identified, that security sector practitioners looked across, covering Left-to Right-Wing Extremism, religious extremism, single-issue activism and other fixations focused on political targets. Emerging as a common thread was the mental health of individuals, those socially isolated and vulnerable to on-line propaganda – a group being 'harnessed for something that they were not being harnessed for before'. Others sensed less obvious but more capable risks among 'fervent gun owners' and RWE.

A small number of individuals prompted by online Militant Jihadism had come to security sector attention by 2018, and had resulted in agencies seeking various connections with the Muslim community. While clear working relationships had been established, and

these considered essential and successful, some unease still existed between agencies and community groupings. This combined with criticism made public by the Human Rights Foundation about the NZSIS 'outreach' strategy, suggests more attention should be paid to how state sector agencies relate to smaller communities – whoever they may be.

Overall, the security sector perceptions of the media were not positive. The media was viewed as a volatile and unavoidable presence, unreliable, inaccurate and focused on entertainment rather than reporting reality. For its perceived superficial coverage of current events, it was recognised as having a critical role influencing broader public and political perceptions of terrorist risk. Ironically, the media possibly had more influence over what general public, bureaucrats and politicians perceived as security risks, than did those practitioners who were actually much more familiar with those risks. This, in turn, exposed the potential for the security sector itself to be driven by media priorities and underlines the need for New Zealand to develop a solid evidence-based national counter terrorism strategy.

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