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Bloodbath in Christchurch: The Rise of Far-Right Terrorism

By Natasha Quek

SYNOPSIS

Last Friday, 50 Muslims were killed when a white supremacist, Brenton Tarrant, targeted two mosques in a shooting spree in Christchurch, New Zealand. Long overshadowed by Islamist radicalism, questions are now asked about what drives the far-right ideology and, specifically, what is the role of the Internet as a driver and enabler of violent far-right extremism and terror.

COMMENTARY

ON 15 MARCH 2019, simultaneous attacks were carried out at the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, where Friday prayers were in session. The attacks resulted in 50 deaths. The perpetrator responsible for the shooting at the Al Noor Mosque recorded the shooting live on Facebook, where he revealed himself to be Brenton Tarrant, a 28-year-old Australian-born far-right extremist. Tarrant was swiftly arrested and brought to court the next day where he was charged with murder; two others have also been detained in connection with the attacks.

New Zealand has not experienced a mass shooting since the Raurimu Massacre in 1997. The latest attacks, while unprecedented in New Zealand, should not be viewed as an isolated incident, but rather an indication of a much broader trend – violent far-right extremism and terror.

What Fuels It?

Before committing the attacks, Tarrant published his 74-page manifesto, highlighting his extremist viewpoints, amplified through the online echo chamber. In his manifesto, he admits that the Internet played a big role in shaping the attacks, stating, “you will

not find the truth anywhere else". It also revealed that over the years, his extremist views manifested in multiple contesting ideologies.

Tarrant, who before the attacks posted pictures of his weapons inscribed with white supremacy symbols, claimed that he was a "communist, then an anarchist and finally a libertarian before becoming to be an eco-fascist". Finding inspiration from online extremist narratives propagated, Tarrant has become another example of the growing and dangerous phenomenon of self-radicalisation through the Internet.

Far-right extremism often creates a narrative based on a perceived threat. One of the core characteristics of far-right movements is followers' nostalgia for the past when they did not have to fear the supposed social, cultural and political threats posed by newcomers in their midst.

As more immigrants came in and are perceived to pose a threat to the cultural status quo, it triggers an insecurity that could serve as a radicalising mechanism.

Leveraging on Insecurities

In addition, Islamist violent extremism and the high crime rates attributed to minority groups only served to perpetuate the notion among the largely white members of far-right movements that these outsiders are a threat to their well-being. Leveraging on such insecurities, far-right movements create narratives that would further stoke fear and resentment among this group of people.

Given the current global security environment, violent far-right elements have capitalised on Islamist terrorism to justify their own acts of terror. With the incessant Internet and media reporting on various Islamist terrorist acts, which at times have Islamophobic overtones, far-right movements can easily pick an incident that will trigger a reaction.

They then use it to their advantage to boost their following, as well as the proliferation of more violent (often vengeful) narratives. Tarrant, on his part, had pointed to past terror incidents perpetrated by Islamist radicals as one of the reasons for his negative views on Muslim immigrants.

Internet as a Reinforcer of Hate

The Internet and social media have allowed paranoia and rage to proliferate far and wide very easily – providing support for hateful ideologues and racists to find like-minded communities and affirmation for their toxic beliefs.

In most cases, for an individual to radicalise into committing violent acts, there must exist a physical or virtual community who share the same grievances, to transmit ideas and reinforce beliefs, and a calling upon individuals to take action to redress the wrongs against them. Today, all these are simplified and amplified within the Internet sphere.

There are numerous websites and social media platforms that provide message boards and comment sections where individuals can share their own grievances and

beliefs – allowing them to find solidarity with others whose views and experiences resonate with theirs.

A thread discussing the Christchurch shooting can already be found on “Storm front”, a site that proclaims itself to be the “voice of the, embattled White minority”. The comments made by the site members are at best dismissive towards the victims and, at worst, vilify the very community which had just been victimised.

One of the comments in response to the shooting incident reads “Islam needs to be deported out of our land”. Another person concurs, by posting that “Invaders aren’t innocent”, reinforcing the innumerable nationalistic racist posts that cover the site.

Need to Counter Online Radicalisation

The ideological element plays a role in an individual’s progression towards extremist violence, but some have argued that it can only manifest into violence when there are pre-existing personal conditions that leaves one vulnerable to exploitation by extremist forces.

It will be the New Zealand authorities’ responsibility to investigate further into Tarrant’s turn into a far-right terrorist but one thing is clear. Online communities provide radicalised individuals such as Tarrant with the opportunity for camaraderie and communication with others who share their views but, in that process, can also set off violent triggers in individuals, with devastating consequences, as evidenced in the latest violence in Christchurch.

The Internet is a potent driver and enabler of radicalisation, regardless of religion, creed and geography. Tarrant’s online rantings and live-streaming of his shootings are additional reasons why there remain an urgent need for a sustained and comprehensive strategy by governments, community stakeholders, media and tech companies in countering all versions of online radicalisation, including the far right variety.

The strategy must address measures to counter virulent online extremist narratives as well as manage the viralisation of live images and renditions of terror attacks on social media platforms. Left unchecked, the attacks in Christchurch might trigger another cycle of violence between extremists, all of whom will cynically use atrocities committed against one another to justify their own mindless acts of violence.

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