

What Next for the Islamic State after Territorial Losses?

Abdul Basit

Sri Lanka Attacks: An Analysis of the Aftermath

Amresh Gunasingham

Rohingya Crisis and Western Myanmar's Evolving Threat Landscape

Iftekharul Bashar

Far-right Terrorism: The Christchurch Attack and Potential Implications on the Asia Pacific Landscape

Jade Hutchinson



June Issue

Current narratives on terrorism and violent extremism by governments, policymakers and law enforcement agencies are largely Islam-centric with an overt focus on the military defeat of terrorist groups. This issue firstly looks into the assumed link between a reduction or elimination of territorial control by terrorist groups and their so-called 'defeat'. Using the Islamic State (IS) as a study, this issue explicates further on a group's cross-border/global networks, linkages and ideological spread to assert that the victory-defeat framework against IS is flawed, as its threat has transformed into a network of smaller cells and geographically dispersed cells. Secondly, this issue looks at the rising threat of far-right extremism and terrorism; a phenomenon which has been under-explored, given the Islam-centric nature of terrorism in recent decades. For instance, it has been reported that 71 percent of fatalities linked to terrorism between 2008 and 2017 in the United States were committed by far-right extremists and white supremacists. This issue specifically examines the recent Christchurch terrorist attack in New Zealand by a far-right extremist and possible implications for the Asia Pacific region.

In the first article, **Abdul Basit** discusses the narrative of defeat against IS after US forces eliminated its last physical stronghold in Syria. It is argued that while IS territory shrank considerably, the group is still active with its ideological appeal attracting smaller networks and cells globally. The author states that IS has managed to remain relevant and active despite losing its physical sanctuaries due to three reasons: (i) revising the ideological narrative; (ii) organisational restructuring; and (iii) forming new networks. This is likely to have far-reaching implications on the global threat landscape that will witness a rise in low-end urban terrorism, more competition from rival groups and reactionary violence from right-wing extremists.

Next, **Amresh Gunasingham** studies the recent attacks in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday that heightened post-war ethnic tensions and brought forth civil war traumas amidst an ongoing political crisis. The article examines the possibility of a communication gap among security agencies that prevented early detection of one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in the country's history. It further details the motivations for the attack as: (i) the Wahhabi factor; (ii) anti-Muslim violence furthering radicalization; and (iii) the possible

links to IS. Possible implications and responses to the attack include a rise in anti-Muslim sentiments and violence with tightened security measures imposed by the state. In order to ensure long-term stability, the state needs measures to promote ethnic and religious harmony with strong counter-terrorism legislation.

Iftekhharul Bashar details the threat landscape in Western Myanmar, focusing on (i) Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), an ethno-nationalist group and (ii) IS and Al-Qaeda (AQ), both Islamist terrorist groups. The article argues that the threat brought on by ethnic violence and Islamist terrorism is facilitated by grievances of the local Rohingya Muslims and motivations for revenge and active presence of IS and AQ networks in the South and Southeast Asia region. The exploitation of the local refugee crisis by IS and AQ coupled with ARSA's resilience requires comprehensive responses that centre on communal harmony in addition to hard-power measures.

Lastly, **Jade Hutchinson** discusses the far-right terrorist threat, specifically in light of the Christchurch shooting at two mosques in New Zealand in March 2019 where 51 people were killed. The article focuses on the attack, the attacker, his links to other far-right extremist groups and the key role the Internet and social media played in facilitating the attack. This incident in New Zealand signals the possibility of further copycat attacks in Australia and other countries, further recruitment towards far-right extremism online and the need to devise policies to effectively counter far-right extremism in the online space.

In conclusion, the editors would like to announce that the CTTA will be transitioning from a monthly publication to a quarterly one. Our first quarterly will be issued in September/October 2019. Moving forward, we will continue to provide our readers with insightful and analytical research on the terrorism and political violence landscape, especially in Southeast Asia and South Asia. We have also taken cognisance of readers' feedback provided in a recent CTTA online survey, and are committed on ensuring that the CTTA remains a research platform for other emerging developments in political violence. Thank you for your continued subscription!

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What Next for the Islamic State after Territorial Losses?

Abdul Basit

Synopsis

Islamic State's (IS) battlefield losses in Syria have reduced the group's territory but its ideological prowess and brand appeal remain undented. The loss of territory has not undermined IS' ability to carry out terrorist attacks despite the premature declaration of victory by President Trump against IS in March. This article argues that the victory-defeat framework against an ideologically-motivated and apocalyptic terrorist group is flawed. Resilient and adaptive, such terrorist groups evolve in adverse circumstances to continue their agendas through alternative means. After military setbacks, IS has moved into the next phase of its lifecycle by transforming into a network of smaller terrorist groups.

Introduction

In March 2019, IS-controlled territory shrank from the size of Britain to less than four square kilometers in the Euphrates valley.¹ Similarly, the flow of IS foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) towards Iraq and Syria has declined from the peak of 1,000 per month to merely 50 per

month.² Likewise, the frequency of its social media propaganda has dipped drastically from 754 social media releases per month in August 2015 to 44 per month in June 2018.³

Following the loss of territory, IS has swiftly transformed from a quasi-state to a transnational insurgent and terrorist group.⁴ The group has also re-plugged its ideological narrative from *Baqiya wa Tatamadad* (expanding and remaining) to a 'campaign of revenge' for the lost Caliphate.⁵ IS has also shifted focus from the centre to the peripheries (such as *wilayahs* and provinces).⁶

After losing Baghouz, IS carried out the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka targeting three luxury hotels and churches, killing over 250 people and injuring 500 others.⁷ Claiming responsibility for the attack, IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi issued a video in April 2019 calling the attack a revenge for the losses in Syria.⁸ The video also reassured IS' global affiliates, networks, individual supporters and sympathisers that the 'caliph' is alive and in charge of the group. In the video, Baghdadi urged followers of the group to carry out more terrorist attacks.⁹

¹ "IS Caliphate Defeated But Jihadist Group Remains A Threat," *BBC News*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45547595>.

² "How Many IS Foreign Fighters Are Left In Iraq And Syria?" *BBC News*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47286935>.

³ Daniel Milton, "Down, but Not Out: An Updated Examination of the Islamic State's Visual Propaganda," *CTC (West Point)*, July 2018, p.4, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/07/Down-But-Not-Out.pdf>.

⁴ "ISIL Now A Covert Global Network Despite Significant Losses, United Nations Counter-Terrorism Head Tells Security Council," United National Security Council, August 23, 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13463.doc.htm>.

⁵ Robert Postings, "ISIS Brands Global Attacks As Vengeance For Sham," *Defence Post*, April 14,

2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/04/14/isis-vengeance-for-sham/>.

⁶ Bruce Hoffman, "ISIS's Shifting Focus," *Cipher Brief*, April 23, 2019, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/isis-shifting-focus.

⁷ "Islamic State Claims Responsibility For Sri Lanka Bombings," *Reuters*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-blasts-claim/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-for-sri-lanka-bombings-idUSKCN1RZ102>.

⁸ "ISIS Releases First Videotape Of Baghdadi In Five Years, US Vows To Track Down Surviving Leaders Of Militant Group," *Straits Times*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/islamic-state-media-group-airs-video-message-from-leader-al-baghdadi>.

⁹ Abdul Basit, "ISIS Announces It Will Keep Fighting in a New Video," *The National Interest*, May 6, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east->

This article has incorporated Richard English's framework of *Does Terrorism Work* along with other relevant literature to illustrate that IS' resilience and adaptability in adverse circumstances has added to its lethality and longevity. The second section examines organisational, ideological and tactical adjustments IS has made to evolve into the next phase of its lifecycle. The final section discusses implications of these developments for the global threat landscape of terrorism.

IS' Longevity and Lethality in the Face of Territorial Losses

English maintains that terrorist groups persist despite failing to achieve their strategic objectives, such as long-term goals or the 'caliphate' in this case. Despite facing detention, assassination and social stigmatisation, terrorist groups endure. English posits that the efficacy of terrorist groups should be measured in relative and not absolute terms. Terrorism is not a zero-sum phenomenon, but a complex incentive structure with groups creating a win-win out of any situation. For example, if a terrorist dies, he or she is perceived as a martyr. If the terrorist survives, he or she would be deemed as a hero. This is why the victory-defeat framework in counter-terrorism is problematic and flawed. It creates a false impression of a terrorist group's defeat through a flawed perception of victory. Despite the setbacks, IS is still the most dangerous and lethal terrorist group in the world. In 2018, the group carried out as many as 3,670 terrorist attacks (the most by any terrorist group during that year).¹⁰ The group still has 14,000 to 18,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, including 3,000 FTFs in Iraq and Syria. These fighters are battle-hardened, ideologically devout and highly skilled.¹¹

English upholds that terrorism (and by extension terrorist groups) persists as long as

[watch/isis-announces-it-will-keep-fighting-new-video-56192](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47691006).

¹⁰ Mina Al-Lami, "Where Is The Islamic State Group Still Active Around The World?" *BBC News*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47691006>.

¹¹ "How Many IS Foreign Fighters Are Left In Iraq And Syria?" *BBC News*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47286935>.

¹² Richard English, *Does Terrorism Work?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7-8.

it continues to work for those who use it. Any terrorist group that operates in accordance with cost-benefit calculations adopts policies that are best suited to achieve its immediate and long-term goals.¹² Judging the success of a terrorist group through its ability or inability to achieve its strategic objectives is oversimplistic as a terrorist group rarely achieves its strategic objectives. Also, primary goals alone do not explain terrorists' actions or successes.¹³ For instance, Audrey Kurth Cronin's examination of 450 terrorist groups revealed that 87.1 percent achieved none of their strategic objectives, and only 4.4 percent succeeded in full achievement of their primary goals.¹⁴

In their life cycles, terrorist groups go through various phases where they adapt to changing circumstances to stay alive and relevant. Even if terrorist groups fail to achieve their primary goals, there can be partial success through secondary strategic aims. Louise Richardson argues that while terrorist groups have struggled to achieve their long-term gains, they have been fairly successful in attaining their near-term aims.¹⁵

IS has survived and persisted despite losing territory (its centre of gravity) due to a clear ideological position. Terrorist groups with a clear ideological position are more easily understood and able to attract supporters and survive longer compared to those that span multiple and less-articulated ideological categories.¹⁶ Due to its clear and well-articulated ideological position, IS comes across as reliable and trustworthy among its following, a quality that has enabled the group to survive and operate in high-risk environments. The ability of a terrorist group to enter into alliances with other groups is directly proportional to its longevity and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How Al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security* 31, no. 1(2006), 7-48.

¹⁵ Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*, (New York: Random House Publishing, 2006), 105-106.

¹⁶ Susan Olzak, "The Effect of Category Spanning on the Lethality and Longevity of Terrorist Organizations," *Social Forces* 95, no. 2 (2016): 559-584.

lethality.¹⁷ IS' resilience and longevity has increased after it made alliances with like-minded groups in Africa and Asia.

IS' Adaptations and Adjustments to Post-Territorial Losses

(i) Organisational Restructuring

After territorial losses, IS has moved away from the proto-state model of the caliphate to a spiritual caliphate.¹⁸ The group has mutated into a transnational network of terrorist groups that functions through its wilayahs (provinces) to remain relevant and gain publicity.¹⁹ IS' hybrid organisational structure has allowed it to quickly adapt to changing operational environments and adverse circumstances.²⁰ As such, IS is able to retain and safeguard its ability to carry out attacks (external operations).

IS' al-Naba online newspaper has published a four-part series entitled, 'The Temporary Fall of Cities as a Working Method for the Mujahideen' which encourages and instructs followers to adopt guerrilla tactics.²¹ Baghdadi's video has also urged IS fighters and supporters to fight and weaken the enemy, stressing that the act of waging the war is more important than winning it.²² In the video, Baghdadi discusses IS' strategic transformation into a global insurgency by

portraying himself as a 'warrior' or 'guerrilla caliph' instead of an 'imam' or 'spiritual caliph.' The image of the caliph has been tailored to suit IS' strategic objectives and politico-military situation.²³ In 2014, IS portrayed Baghdadi as a spiritual leader and imam of a revolutionary ideological movement by leading the Friday prayers in Mosul's Al-Nuri mosque. In the most recent video, he was shown as a 'guerrilla caliph' leading a global insurgency. He was seen wearing a military jacket with an AK-47 assault rifle, playing a direct role in IS' war.²⁴

Moreover, while IS is expanding and decentralising its operations in some areas, it is downsizing and centralising in others. For instance, IS has decentralised Wilayah Khorasan in South Asia by announcing two new Wilayahs in India and Pakistan on 10 and 15 May, respectively.²⁵ At the same time, IS has centralised multiple wilayahs in Iraq and Syria into two (Wilayah Sham and Wilayah Iraq) to manage them more efficiently after territorial losses.²⁶ In addition to the declaration of new wilayahs, IS already has eight official affiliates and over 24 networks around the world, according to the US New Counter Terrorism Strategy document.²⁷

(ii) Revising the Ideological Narrative

¹⁷ Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 25.

¹⁸ Colin P. Clarke, "The Power of Affiliates: Which Islamic State Franchise Could Become the Most Capable?" *Rand Corporation*, October 9, 2018, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/10/the-power-of-affiliates-which-islamic-state-franchise.html>.

¹⁹ Charlie Winter and Aymenn al-Tamimi, "ISIS Relaunches as a Global Platform," *The Atlantic*, April 27, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/the-sri-lanka-bombings-were-a-preview-of-isis-future/588175/>.

²⁰ Hasan Hasan, "Welcome to the Post-Middle East ISIS," *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/03/welcome-to-the-post-middle-east-isis/>.

²¹ Lena Masri And Ali Abdelaty, "Instructions From Headquarters: Islamic State's New Guerrilla Manual," *Reuters*, May 24, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-security-islamic-state/instructions-from-headquarters-islamic-states-new-guerrilla-manual-idUSKCN1SU19J>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Haror Ingram, Craig White and Charlie Winter, "The Guerrilla Caliph: Speeches that Bookend the

Islamic State's Caliphate Era," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 5: 43, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2019/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052019.pdf>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ayaz Gul, "Islamic State Announces Pakistan Province," *Voice Of America*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-announces-pakistan-province/4918903.html>; Fayaz Bukhari and Alasdair Pal, "Islamic State Claims Province In India For First Time After Clash In Kashmir," *Reuters*, May 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-islamic-state/islamic-state-claims-province-in-india-for-first-time-after-clash-in-kashmir-idUSKCN1SH08J>.

²⁶ Colin P. Clarke, "What Does the Islamic State's Organisational Restructuring Tell Us?" *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, June 3, 2019, <https://icct.nl/publication/what-does-the-islamic-states-organisational-restructuring-tell-us/>.

²⁷ "National Strategy for Counter Terrorism of the United States of America," White House, 2018, p.8, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf>.

Terrorist groups' ideologies are revised and reformed according to changing strategic requirements, organisational needs and operational environments.²⁸ The agile and adaptive ideological frameworks allow terrorist groups to evolve fairly quickly to ensure their survival and its ability to expand. In contrast, rigid organisational structures and ideological frameworks can lead to the downfall of terrorist groups.²⁹

IS' ability to exploit the grievances of Muslim minorities and use their alienation for its own ideological agenda are likely to keep it afloat. The Sri Lanka attacks against Christians were a prime example, where the grievances and sense of disenfranchisement of a segment of Sri Lankan Muslims were exploited by IS to fulfil its own strategic goal of global expansion.³⁰

The new IS ideology is driven by a strong sense of revenge for the lost caliphate.³¹ The revenge campaign is to dispel the impression that the loss of territory in Iraq and Syria has weakened the group. Soon after IS claimed responsibility for the Sri Lanka attacks, one of its supporters posted in the Telegram messaging service that, "the biggest attack happened without any territory, so you failed."³² Therefore, the narrative of revenge still appeals to aspiring radicals and extremists.³³

(iii) Forming New Networks

Another important, but not entirely new facet of IS' global expansion is its ability to form networks with like-minded radical militant groups in different parts of the world. According to the new US counter-terrorism policy document, the terror group has over two dozen networks in different parts of the world.³⁴ This networking effort will increase and intensify further as IS is likely to search for other partners to expand its global footprint and conduct further attacks.³⁵ The cohort of IS-trained FTFs emerging out of Syria is operationally experienced, battle-hardened, highly skilled and networked.³⁶ Deciphering various forms of high-end and low-end cooperation and linkages between IS-linked local jihadist cells and the role that returning FTFs play in these partnerships will be critical in determining the formation of networks and the threat they pose.³⁷

The Easter bombings in Sri Lanka provide insights into this trend. Firstly, IS linked up with a radical Islamist network, the National Tawheed Jamaat (NTJ), to carry out the attacks.³⁸ NTJ is an offshoot of the Sri Lankan Tawheed Jammāt (STJ) and was involved in defacing statues of Buddha in 2018 in the country.³⁹ Secondly, one of the eight suicide bombers, Jameel Mohammed Abdul Latif, lived, trained and fought with IS in Syria.⁴⁰ NTJ's head and ringleader of the suicide

²⁸ Ekaterina Stepanova, "Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict: Ideological and Structural Aspects," *SIPRI Report*, 2008, p.23, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/RR/SIPRI_RR23.pdf.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Islamic State Leader Says Sri Lanka Attack Were 'Revenge' For Syria," *Israel Hayom*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2019/04/30/islamic-state-leader-says-sri-lanka-attack-were-revenge-for-syria/>.

³¹ "ISIL Leader: Easter Attacks Were Revenge For Syria," *Youtube*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxWfaJIGA0c>.

³² Abdul Basit, "Islamic State: From Territorial to Spiritual Caliphate," *IPP Review*, May 13, 2019, <https://ippreview.com/index.php/Blog/single/id/966.html>.

³³ Peter Bergen, "Even In Defeat, ISIS' Ideology Inspires Mass Murder," *CNN*, April 24, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/23/opinions/defeated-isis-still-inspires-mass-murder-bergen/index.html>.

³⁴ "National Strategy for Counter Terrorism of the United States of America."

³⁵ Chloe Cornish, Asser Khattab And David Bond, "Isis Leader Seeks To Refocus On Spreading Global

Terror," *Financial Times*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/d0a70c50-6b43-11e9-80c7-60ee53e6681d>.

³⁶ "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon and Related Security Trends in the Middle East," Government of Canada, January 29, 2016, p.81, <https://www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/publications/the-foreign-fighters-phenomenon-and-related-security-trends-in-the-middle-east.html>.

³⁷ Author's interview with Farhan Zahid, a counter-terrorism researcher based in Islamabad, May 15, 2019.

³⁸ "Sri Lanka's National Tawheed Jamaat Has Long-Standing Relationship With India's Tamil Nadu Thowheed Jamaat," *Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI)*, April 29, 2019, <https://www.memri.org/reports/sri-lankas-national-tawheed-jamaat-has-long-standing-relationship-indias-tamil-nadu-thowheed>.

³⁹ "Sri Lanka attacks: Who are National Thowheed Jamath?" *BBC News*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48012694>.

⁴⁰ Niharika Mandhana, Rob Taylor and Saeed Shah, "Sri Lanka Bomber Trained in Syria With Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2019,

bombers, Zahran Hashim, had links with Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen India (JMI).⁴¹ The nexus with NTJ not only extended IS' geographical reach to Sri Lanka, but the alliance also provided publicity for the group. Through the attacks in Sri Lanka, IS managed to generate shock within the media and the general public. Therefore, network alliances with like-minded groups increase the longevity and lethality of terrorist groups.

As in the Sri Lanka attacks, IS has used familial and kinship networks to radicalise family units and perpetrate attacks in different parts of the world. Two of the eight suicide bombers in the Sri Lanka attacks, Inshaf Ibrahim and Ilham Ibrahim, were brothers and sons of a wealthy spice-trader, Mohamed Ibrahim.⁴² Inshaf targeted the Shangri-La Hotel while Ilham detonated his suicide vest at the Cinnamon Grand hotel. Ilham's wife, Fatima Fazla, blew herself up, along with her unborn child and two sons, when police raided their house.⁴³ Similar use of familial ties and kinship networks was evident during the 2015 Paris attacks, the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery in Bangladesh and the 2018 Surabaya church attacks in Indonesia.

Kin terrorism is qualitatively different from traditional forms of terrorism as it involves personal and psychological factors of radicalisation, instead of individual and ideological factors.⁴⁴ It is harder to detect as it occurs in an environment of trust and secrecy within the family. Moreover, the stigma of betraying the family also bars unwilling family members from reporting such incidents to the authorities.⁴⁵

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/sri-lanka-attacks-show-isis-reach-even-after-defeat-11556561912>.

⁴¹ "Sri Lankan Group Behind Serial Bombings Had Close Ties To India-based terror outfit," *India Today*, April 23, 2019,

<https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/group-suspected-behind-sri-lanka-serial-blasts-had-close-links-with-india-based-terror-outfit-1508296-2019-04-23>;

Meera Srinivasan and Suhasni Haider, "Sri Lanka Easter Blasts: Suspected Mastermind Zahran Hashim Spent Time In South India, Says Top Military Source," *The Hindu*, April 26, 2019,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-easter-blasts-suspected-mastermind-zahran-hashim-spent-time-in-south-india-says-top-military-source/article26959549.ece>.

⁴² Joe Brock, Shihar Aneez and Ranga Sirilal, "Blood Brothers - The Wealthy Family Behind Sri Lanka's Suicide Attacks," *The Star*, April 24, 2019,

Implications

(i) Global Jihadist Competition

IS global expansion through new affiliates and networks will fuel global jihadist competition with Al-Qaeda (AQ). These moves will pressurise AQ to respond by attempting to hold its place in the global jihadist landscape while benefitting from IS losses as well. Following IS territorial losses in Syria, Baghdadi quickly issued the video mentioned above to ensure that IS supporters do not defect to AQ. The declaration of new wilayahs by IS will trigger renewed competition for recruits, resources and domination of the ideological narratives. IS' ingress into new areas will test AQ's strategy of localisation by embedding with local militant groups and insurgent organisations in places such as Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Mali. If IS manages to link up with like-minded networks in these theatres and carry out attacks, AQ would be forced to retaliate. Otherwise, it might lose more ambitious militants from its allied groups to IS. This will render the global jihadist landscape to be more volatile, complex and fluid. The struggle for domination may increase jihadist infighting, resulting in further violence in different local conflict zones.

(ii) Reciprocal Radicalisation

Reciprocal radicalisation refers to a situation where one form of extremism feeds off and amplifies other forms of extremism.⁴⁶ IS has honed the art of creating communal and

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2019/04/24/blood-brothers>.

⁴³ Bill Gardner and Ben Farmer, "Pregnant Wife Of Sri Lanka Bomber Detonated Suicide Vest," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 25, 2019,

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/sri-lanka-bombings-the-wealthy-family-behind-the-suicide-attacks-20190425-p51h0n.html>.

⁴⁴ Mohamed M. Hafeez, "The Ties that Bind: How Terrorist Exploit Family Bonds," *CTC Sentinel* 2, no. 2: 16, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-ties-that-bind-how-terrorists-exploit-family-bonds/>.

⁴⁵ Jack Schafer, "What Are Family Terrorism Networks?" *Psychology Today*, February 16, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/let-their-words-do-the-talking/201902/what-are-family-terrorism-networks>.

⁴⁶ Tore Hamming, "Dynamics of Reciprocal Radicalisation," *Twitter*, March 28, 2019,

sectarian tensions to find space to grow. The group intentionally provokes one form of extremism so that other (rival) groups respond in kind by imitating similar violent tactics grounded in hate-based ideologies.

This was seen in the Christchurch mosque attacks and Sri Lanka bombings in qualitatively different ways. Following the Christchurch mosque attack by a right-wing extremist, IS was quick to exploit this incident by threatening revenge attacks.⁴⁷ Following the IS perpetrated Easter bombings in Sri Lanka, the mob attacks on Muslim businesses, properties and mosques by Buddhist extremists will allow IS opportunities to entrench itself in a volatile society. IS is likely to exploit the insecurities and marginalisation of Muslim minorities to get further recruits.

The group deliberately creates a situation of 'tawahush' (anarchy and chaos) to expand.⁴⁸ In 2006, IS - then known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) - bombed a revered spiritual place for Shias in Iraq (Askari Mosque) to create a Sunni-Shia rift to win over the sympathies and loyalties of Sunnis in Iraq.⁴⁹ In 2014, IS used the narrative of 'Sunnayah Mazloomiyah' (Sunni victimhood) against the Syrian and Iraqi Shia governments of Bashar Al-Assad and Nuri Al-Maliki to garner support of the Sunnis with a great degree of success.⁵⁰ Similarly, IS has targeted Shia mosques, churches and Sufi shrines around the world to stir ideological anguish and exploit local fissures.

<https://twitter.com/ToreRHamming/status/1111175716987641856>.

⁴⁷ Richard Hall and Lizzie Dearden, "Isis Calls On Followers To Take Revenge For New Zealand Terror Attack," *Guardian*, March 19, 2019,

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-new-zealand-shooting-christchurch-mosque-attack-syria-a8829246.html>.

⁴⁸ "Interview with the Amir of Khilafah's Soldiers in Bengal: Shaykh Abu Ibrahim Al-Hanif," *Dabiq* (Issue14), April 2016 (1437 Rajab), p. 63,

<https://clarionproject.org/docs/Dabiq-Issue-14.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Michael Howard, "Sectarian Violence Explodes After Attack on Mosque," *Guardian*, February 24, 2006,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/feb/24/iraq.topstories3>.

⁵⁰ Colin Clarke and Haroro Ingram, "Defeating ISIS Nostalgia Narrative," *Rand Corporation*, April 19, 2018, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/04/defeating-the-isis-nostalgia-narrative.html>.

⁵¹ "IS-linked Posters Incite Lone Wolf Attacks in London & NYC," *Site Intelligence*, May 21, 2019,

(iii) Rise in Low-end Urban Terrorism

In this phase of its organisational evolution, IS would also rely on low-end urban terrorism involving truck and knife attacks against soft targets and targeted assassinations using lone-wolf terrorists and sleeper cells.⁵¹ IS operatives and sympathisers have employed this tactic with relative success in the West. For instance, IS was urging its supporters and sympathisers to obtain vehicles for attacks back in 2016.⁵²

As no major funding, skillset or sophisticated planning is required, these low-tech methods are cost-effective and high-impact. All a terrorist needs is a car or knife and the willingness to kill.⁵³ With its low barriers to entry, attacks involving low-tech methods are hard to detect and prevent.⁵⁴ As such, low-tech attacks remain random and unpredictable.

The implications of this are twofold. One, in the age of social media, these attacks draw instant coverage and create an impression of insecurity in major cities. Cities are the lifelines of developed societies and any uncertainty about their security can impact tourism and economic growth. Two, such attacks would raise the cost of securing cities in developed societies. As the vulnerability of civilians and public places as potential targets increases, mass casualties are more likely.⁵⁵

<https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Chatter/isis-linked-poster-incites-lone-wolf-attacks-in-london-nyc.html>.

⁵² Tessa Berenson, "Using a Truck as a Weapon Called an 'Evolution' in Terror Strategy," *Time*, July 15, 2016, <http://time.com/4407732/isis-truck-nice-attack/>.

⁵³ "How And Why Vehicle Ramming Became The Attack Of Choice For Terrorists," *The Conversation*, March 29, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/how-and-why-vehicle-ramming-became-the-attack-of-choice-for-terrorists-75236>.

⁵⁴ Daniel R. De Petris, "ISIS is Using Low-Tech Means to Inflict Large-Scale Terror," *The National Interest*, September 6, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis-using-low-tech-means-inflict-large-scale-terror-22190>.

⁵⁵ Corri Zoli, "Is There Any Defense Against Low-Tech Terror?" *Foreign Policy*, October 2, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/02/terror-has-gone-low-tech/>.

Conclusion

The threat posed by IS is far from over. While it is true that the group has been deprived of establishing a physical caliphate, the claim by policymakers and governments that IS has been defeated (after being driven out of Baghouz in Syria), is misleading. The IS threat is a combination of three main factors: territorial caliphate, ideology and brand appeal. Of these three factors, only the territory has been eliminated, with the ideology and brand appeal still intact. More importantly, unlike territory, the latter two are intangible and cannot be 'defeated' as such. A superior counter-narrative based on a robust set of ideas could assist in neutralising IS' ideological and brand appeal among its affiliates.

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Sri Lanka Attacks: An Analysis of the Aftermath

Amresh Gunasingham

Synopsis

This article examines the recent Easter bomb attacks in Sri Lanka, which have heightened post-war ethnic tensions and resurfaced civil war traumas amidst an ongoing political crisis. The scale and coordination of the bombings indicate an advanced logistical capability and structure among domestic Islamist networks, which will have to be effectively dismantled to prevent more devastating attacks in future. Against this backdrop, the motivations behind the terrorist attack as well as its implications for an already fragile post-war order in Sri Lanka are assessed in this article. To enhance long-term prospects for peace and stability, the country needs a comprehensive National Security framework, which should include initiatives to foster ethnic reconciliation and tougher counter-terrorism legislation.

Introduction

One of the deadliest terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka in decades shattered a period of relative peace in the island on Easter Sunday, reviving sectarian tensions that fueled a three-decade civil war in the island-state. In all, eight men and one woman belonging to local Islamist groups detonated bombs almost simultaneously in several parts of the country, killing themselves and more than 250 others.¹ The terrorist attack, which targeted Christian worshippers and tourists, suggests a new front in Sri Lanka's long and complex history of inter-ethnic and inter-religious violence. A previous civil war had pitted the government against a separatist movement from the

minority Tamil community who pioneered modern-day suicide attacks.

The involvement of an Islamist cell, reportedly affiliated with the Islamic State, was a surprise to many observers. Previously, Islamist extremism had not been a prominent feature in Sri Lanka as it has been elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia. Although a legacy of the civil war, the marginalisation of minority groups, political upheaval and security lapses have cultivated fertile ground for a militant movement to emerge.² Sri Lanka's population cannot be neatly divided by race, faith and language. Over 70 percent are Sinhalese, who are mostly Buddhist although a minority are Christian. A further 15 percent are Tamil, who are largely Hindu and Christian. Muslims comprise 10 percent and are considered ethnically distinct even though many speak Tamil.³ Going forward, the attack will become an essential part of Sri Lanka's conflict dynamic and could go on to have lasting and destabilising effects.⁴ It will also strengthen the hand of hard-line groups within the Sinhala Buddhist community, who have instigated a wave of revenge attacks targeting Muslims in the intervening weeks. Urgent mitigating measures will have to be undertaken by the government, community leaders and the populace to prevent a new era of violence from emerging.

Missed Signals

A network of 150 people belonging to two previously little-known domestic Islamist groups – National Thawheedh Jamaath (NTJ) and Jaamiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI) -

¹ "Sri Lanka attacks: What we know about the Easter bombings," *BBC News*, 28 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48010697>.

² "Sri Lanka's Saudi Connections revealed in latest arrest over Easter Bombings," *South China Morning Post*, 12 May 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3009906/sri-lankas-saudi-connections-revealed-latest-arrest-over>.

³ "A Horrific Flashback in Sri Lanka," *The Atlantic*, 21 April, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/04/sri-lanka-attacks/587677/>

⁴ Alan Keenan, "Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Peaceful Co-Existence Under Attack," *International Crisis Group*, 23 April, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/sri-lankas-easter-bombings-peaceful-coexistence-under-attack>

coordinated and executed the attacks, likely with support from IS, the government said.⁵ Police had also recovered explosives, weapons and other materials during several raids. Investigations also revealed that the suicide bombs used contained ball bearings, iron nails and triacetone triperoxide, commonly known as TATP, which is the explosive of choice for IS-inspired attackers. The explosive was also used by the IS terrorist cell behind the deadly bomb attacks in Paris in November 2015.

Several of the Easter Sunday attackers were part of family units radicalised by extremist ideology, operating as part of a larger network.⁶ Information was said to be tightly protected within these networks bonded by family ties that transcended their ideological motivations. The group's leader, Zahran Hashim, was a highly charismatic radical ideologue known for his YouTube videos that articulated a hard-line interpretation of Islam, mainly in the Tamil language. Hashim is believed to have recruited for IS since at least 2015 and was said to be well-known within Tamil-speaking communities in the South Asia region. In their recruitment efforts, Hashim and his group were effective in targeting relatively affluent men living in urban areas.

For many Sri Lankans, the larger question of how an attack of this scale, brutality and lethality, which would have required an extensive network of planners, handlers and use of safe houses as well as bomb-making expertise and significant funding, went undetected by the authorities looms large.⁷ One factor was the state's overwhelming focus on suppressing any revival of Tamil separatism in the decade following the war, that led to an emerging radical Islamist threat being underestimated. Another is the power struggle which has bedeviled the present

coalition government since the end of last year. President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe belong to different political parties and have a tenuous relationship.⁸ According to observers, this created a communications gap among key security agencies such as the military, police and possibly, the intelligence services. The government has admitted that several warnings from Indian intelligence sources of an imminent terrorist attack in the preceding weeks were not shared among the agencies and acted upon.

Motivations

Wahhabi Factor

Sri Lanka's Muslims, largely Sunnis, have peacefully co-existed with other communities through most of the country's history. Since the 1980s, however, the oil boom and resultant inflow of Middle Eastern funding has had a visible impact in Muslim towns along the East coast, with an increasing number of mosques and madrassas (religious schools) promoting a narrow, literalist interpretation of Islam underpinned by Wahhabism mushrooming in some areas. Local preachers and Sri Lankans who spent years studying and working in the Middle East "exposed to strict Wahhabi ideas also began to have a cumulative impact back home, including influencing dress codes and reducing inter-faith interaction."⁹

Reports have highlighted Muslims in some towns isolating themselves from the wider community by, for example, attending segregated schools.¹⁰ A number of women began to also wear the burqa (full-body and face covering garment), previously uncommon among Sri Lankan Muslim women, who traditionally observed Sri Lankan dress practices.¹¹

⁵ "Sri Lanka Bombings," *Al-Jazeera News*, 2 May, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/sri-lanka-bombings-latest-updates-190421092621543.html>.

⁶ "Sri Lanka Attacks: The Family Networks Behind the Bombings," *BBC News*, 11 May, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48218907>.

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ "Sri Lanka PM Not Alerted to Warnings of Attack," *Reuters*, 22 April, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-blasts-politics/sri-lanka-pm-not-alerted-to-warning-of-attack-because-of-feud-minister-idUSKCN1RY15D>.

⁹ Kumar Ramakrishna, "The Easter Sunday Attacks: Struggle For The Soul of Sri Lankan Muslims," *RSIS Commentaries*, 3 May, 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nssp/the-easter-sunday-attacks-struggle-for-the-soul-of-sri-lankan-muslims/#.XOlaA1wzZPY>.

¹⁰ Amresh Gunasingham, "Arrest of Influential Religious Hardliner and Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka," August 2018, *Counter Terrorist Trends And Analyses*, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/CTTA-August-2018.pdf>.

¹¹ *ibid*

Over the last decade, various forms of Wahhabi influence have exacerbated both ethnic tensions and divisions within Muslim communities, specifically between mainstream Sufi Muslims and Salafists¹². Dennis McGilvray and Mirak Raheem observed in a 2007 paper for the East-West Centre in Washington that a series of attacks by Salafi groups since the early 2000s against mosques and Sufi shrines in some Muslim towns provided an early indication that violence by fundamentalist Muslim groups against Sufis might one day give rise to armed Islamist movements in Sri Lanka.¹³

Security experts also point out that the spread of more conservative Islamic values among some Muslim communities, particularly in the north and east of Sri Lanka, may have been tolerated by successive governments for several decades as a counter to the recruitment efforts of the Tamil separatists.¹⁴ Muslims never quite belonged to either side during the 26-year long conflict. Some joined and fought in the government's security forces, while a sizeable number of Tamil Muslims were known to be in the ranks of the separatists.

Anti-Muslim Violence

In Sri Lanka, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism is the key ideology that has been exploited by ultra-nationalists within the Sinhalese community to fan ethno-religious tensions and promote a majoritarian agenda that has systematically marginalised minority groups. Ethno-centric policies pursued by successive governments complicit with the Sinhala Buddhist majority, such as the implementation of Sinhala as the country's official language were, among other factors, the main spur for the Tamils' separatist campaign.

¹² Salafism is a puritanical interpretation of Islam closely linked to Wahhabism, that has often been cited as the ideology of radical Islamists worldwide.

¹³ Dennis McGilvray and Mirak Raheem, "Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict," *Policy Studies* 41, 2007, Washington D.C.: East-West Center.

¹⁴ Ranga Jayasuriya, "How Wahhabism Was Fostered Until It Was Too Late," *Daily Mirror*, 30 April, 2019, http://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/How-Wahhabism-was-fostered-until-it%E2%80%99s-too-late/172-166180?fbclid=IwAR3OytbXrKAmY1hggFahs_rkj67u8N9w3YLSwPTzNPrtRZGO6nVd4-4Svnl.

Soon after the government defeated the Tamil Tiger separatists in May 2009, Sri Lanka's Muslim community became the target of violence, hate speech and economic boycotts by hardline Sinhalese Buddhist groups like Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). These groups claimed that Muslims threatened the island's stability and Buddhist character.¹⁵ The rise in Sinhala Buddhists' animus against local Muslims coincided with IS' expansion in Iraq and Syria, which fuelled a global Islamophobic discourse that was ripe for exploitation. In March 2018, the Sri Lankan government declared a country-wide state of emergency when hardline Buddhist mobs ransacked Muslim homes and businesses in the centrally located city of Kandy — reportedly in retaliation for the beating of a Buddhist by Muslim men. Earlier in 2014, at least two people were killed and 80 wounded during sectarian clashes in Dharga Town in the country's southwest.

According to analysts, given the scale of sustained violence and frustration within the Muslim community, the environment appeared ripe for fostering radicalism and militancy.¹⁶ Until the recent Easter attacks, however, violence committed by Islamist radical movements had hitherto been against other Muslims and not Sri Lankans of other faiths. The first signs of a shift came last December, when police investigations into attacks on Buddhist statues led to the arrest of several individuals with known links to local Islamist radical groups. Weeks later in mid-January, law enforcement seized over 100kg (220lb) of explosives and 100 detonators belonging to the same network, hidden in a coconut grove in the Puttalam district on the west coast of the country.¹⁷ These incidents, it would later emerge, were part of a larger terrorist operation that culminated in the Easter Sunday bombings.

¹⁵ Alan Keenan, "Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Peaceful Co-existence Under Attack," *International Crisis Group*, 23 April, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/sri-lankas-easter-bombings-peaceful-coexistence-under-attack>.

¹⁶ "Radicalisation Among Sri Lanka's Muslims Was Slow And Steady," *AP News*, 25 April, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/89a58ddb39b4feb3f106fbd593ee>

¹⁷ "Sri Lanka Seizes Explosives From Local Islamist Radicals," *Dhaka Tribune*, 19 January, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/2019/01/19/sri-lanka-seize-explosives-from-local-islamist-radicals>.

IS Factor

IS claimed the Sri Lanka attack in a video showing the attackers gathering in front of its flag to pledge allegiance to leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group added in a later statement it had "targeted nationals of the crusader alliance [anti-IS US-led coalition] and Christians in Sri Lanka".¹⁸ Observers speculate churches and luxury hotels that were bombed may have been deliberately targeted due to their perceived representation of Western culture.

According to counter-terrorism experts tracking IS' media operations prior to the Easter attacks, there had previously been little mention of Sri Lanka in the group's propaganda discourse. For the most part, IS had channeled its vitriol against Christian communities living in the Middle East, Europe and more recently West Africa. However, evidence that Sri Lankan Muslims were being recruited, emerged in 2016 with reports of at least 32 Muslim citizens joining the group during the height of its caliphate operations.¹⁹ Although at the time the Sri Lankan government denied the presence of an active IS cell domestically, it has more recently said that some returnees from Syria as well as others with known connections to IS militants, had a role in radicalising the Easter bombers.²⁰

The attackers, some of whom spent years living in Britain and Australia as well as parts of the Middle East, appeared to have been radicalised by IS' vow for revenge following the collapse of its caliphate in Iraq and Syria. That several of them were "well educated" and "middle class" is also not surprising.²¹ Although poverty and lack of opportunities have been regularly cited as key drivers in the

¹⁸ "Sri Lanka Attacks: Bomber Studied in UK And Australia," *BBC News*, 24 April, 2019,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48035043>

¹⁹ "What's Different About The Attacks In Sri Lanka," *The Atlantic*, 22 April, 2019,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/04/sri-lanka-hasnt-seen-kind-islamist-terrorism/587761/>.

²⁰ "We Knew What Was Coming': Sri Lanka sees ISIS' Hand in Attacks," *The New York Times*, 3 May, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/03/world/asia/sri-lanka-attacks-isis.html>.

²¹ "Sri Lanka Suicide Bombers Included Two Sons of Wealthy Spice Tycoon," *Today Online*, 25 April, 2019,

radicalisation process, there are numerous examples of individuals abandoning a relatively comfortable lifestyle to take up a violent cause. According to analysts, the recruitment of networks from all strata of society in the Sri Lanka attacks demonstrates the lure of IS' powerful ideology, and was accelerated by the group's shift in strategy towards a global insurgency model on several new fronts following its loss of territories in Syria.²²

Implications

Climate of Fear

In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, anti-Muslim sentiments and violence have surged, with mosques and Muslim-owned shops looted and burned by Sinhalese mobs in a series of organised attacks on Muslims and their premises which reports indicate were orchestrated by hardline groups.²³ Such attacks have proliferated despite the imposition of nationwide curfews and the arrest of several rioters. Given the fragile atmosphere in Sri Lanka, many Muslims fear further retaliatory attacks.

According to analysts, these attacks should not merely be viewed as direct retaliation for the Easter bombings; they follow previous patterns of anti-Muslim violence, fueled by opportunism and past prejudices among Sinhalese Buddhists against the Muslim community.²⁴ It is in this context that reports of state complicity in the latest violence have emerged, with affected Muslims accusing the Sinhala-majority security forces of not adequately intervening to prevent mobs

<https://www.todayonline.com/world/sri-lanka-suicide-bombers-included-two-sons-wealthy-spice-tycoon>.

²² "Sri Lanka Attack Signals ISIS' Widening Reach," *The New York Times*, 25 April, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/world/asia/isis-sri-lanka.html>.

²³ "Mobs Attack Mosques, Muslim-owned Shops And Homes In Sri Lanka's Kurunegala District," *The Hindu*, 14 May, 2019,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/mobs-attack-mosques-muslim-owned-shops-and-homes-in-sri-lankas-kurunegala-district/article27119473.ece>.

²⁴ "Buddhist Anger Could Tear Sri Lanka Apart,"

Foreign Policy, 20 May, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/20/buddhist-anger-could-tear-sri-lanka-apart/>

from running amok. These claims have been refuted by the authorities.²⁵

Many of Sri Lanka's 15 million Buddhists also fear they could become a jihadist target, with fake news and misinformation circulating wildly in recent weeks, fueling communal tensions.²⁶ The fear is that recent developments will embolden extremists on all sides, which could eventually spark a deadly cycle of inter-communal conflict. Firebrand Buddhist monks have already come out to publicly rebuke the government for failing to heed their repeated warnings about radicalisation among some Muslim communities.²⁷ Such hardliners have long stoked hostilities by claiming that the influence of Wahhabi ideology has made the Muslim community more conservative and insular.

Increased Militarisation

When the civil war ended, many Sri Lankans yearned for a return to normalcy in which security concerns would take a backseat to socio-economic and developmental concerns.²⁸ The previous Rajapaksa regime was thought to have over-emphasised the security state even after the threat posed by the Tamil separatist movement had passed.²⁹ When President Mahinda Rajapaksa subsequently lost in the 2015 elections, Sirisena came to power presenting himself as a democratic reformer. However, according to an article in *The New York Times*, he may have been too quick to move Sri Lanka off its military footing –and sidelining a previously formidable intelligence apparatus.³⁰

For his part, Sirisena has frequently accused his detractors of being insufficiently supportive of the country's security apparatus in the face

of demands from international human rights groups for credible investigations into allegations of possible abuses committed during the war.³¹ Following public calls for a strong security response after the Easter attack, Sirisena has taken a tougher stance, declaring an emergency that accords broad powers of arrest and detention to the security forces. He has also deployed military personnel at security check points around the island and heightened surveillance mechanisms.

While investigations and tightened security measures are essential to reassure a frightened public, the Sri Lankan Muslim community is not a monolith and it is important to distinguish between the majority of peace-loving Muslims and the tiny proportion of extremists. As such, an overly militarised response amidst emerging calls for a severe legal and surveillance regime to be enacted, could be counterproductive and will likely only result in the securitisation of the Muslim community and their religious identity, which in turn may result in more reciprocal radicalisation in other communities.³² In this regard, Sirisena's recent decision to impose a ban on Muslim women wearing the burqa and niqab (face veil) following the Easter attack risks further antagonizing? the community. The release from jail of the prominent hardline monk Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, following a Presidential pardon is likely to be another lightning rod for tensions. Gnanasara had faced accusations of stirring up violence against Muslims and Christians before his imprisonment, allegations he has denied.

In another development, the country's former Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa who led the final push in the battle against the

²⁵ "Sri Lanka's Army Denies Colluding with Anti-Muslim Rioters," *Channel News Asia*, 15 May, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/sri-lanka-army-denies-colluding-with-ant-muslim-rioters-11535552>.

²⁶ "Suicide Bombers Fuel Fears Among Sri Lanka's Majority Buddhists," *Colombo Page*, 2 May, 2019, http://www.colombopage.com/NEW_LPC/NewsFiles/19/May02_1556803112.php.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Greg Sheridan, "ISIS Needed No New Excuse For Carnage In Sri Lanka," *The Australian*, 25 April, 2019, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/isis-needed-no-new-excuse-for-carnage-in-sri-lanka/news-story/f3929f47097654ac577986b682071dfc>.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ "We Knew What Was Coming: Sri Lanka sees ISIS' Hand in Attacks," *The New York Times*, 3 May, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/26/world/asia/sri-lanka-bombings.html>.

³¹ "Sri Lanka Attacks: President Says Civil War Inquiries Left Country Vulnerable," *The Guardian*, 26 April, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/26/sri-lanka-attacks-president-says-civil-war-inquiries-left-country-vulnerable>.

³² "The Religious Tensions Behind The Attacks in Sri Lanka," *Foreign Affairs*, 24 April, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/sri-lanka/2019-04-24/religious-tensions-behind-attacks-sri-lanka>.

Tamil Tiger separatists, has declared his intention to run in the next Presidential election, vowing to “tackle radical Islam” and rebuild the country’s intelligence apparatus.³³ An opposition led by Rajapaksa stands to benefit from the climate of fear currently gripping the country. However, the return of a Rajapaksa regime could also endanger the current government’s modest efforts at post-war reconciliation between the various ethnic groups. During the tenure of the previous government between 2005-2015, militant Buddhist organisations such as BBS (Buddhist Power Force) were allowed to incite violence against Muslims with impunity.

Outlook

The terrorist attacks on Easter Sunday and the wave of anti-Muslim unrest left many Sri Lankans tense and in a state of suspicion. Thorough investigations and tightened security measures are essential to reassure an alarmed public, given reports of rising anger towards Muslims, particularly following IS’ claim of responsibility for the attack and police warnings of possible future attacks.

Sri Lanka’s deeply divided coalition government is under growing public pressure and needs to initiate sweeping reforms to the intelligence and security apparatus, if a similar disaster is to be averted in future. One counter-terrorism expert has proposed a comprehensive National Security Framework that includes tougher laws to tackle extremists of all denominations. Within this framework, Sri Lanka should enact legislation that criminalises hate speech and the incitement of racial tensions.³⁴ Further, radical preachers coming into Sri Lanka should be more effectively screened to ensure they have no links to extremist groups, while local religious preachers should be suitably accredited.

In cyberspace, the government has repeatedly opted to suspend social media platforms in situations of emergency. Yet, the inability of platforms such as Facebook to effectively monitor and counter the spread of misinformation during times of crisis, continues to present a major challenge. To more effectively address the issue, individuals and groups posting inflammatory material online need to be censored by the law. Social media companies should also be held accountable for the proliferation of extremist content on their platforms.

Going forward, the response of the government and the various communities in Sri Lanka to the Easter attacks will greatly affect future prospects for peace and stability in the country. A hardline stance that refuses to address systemic issues of bias and discrimination, will continue to fuel extremism. Similarly, if radical groups use the attacks to fuel fear of minorities and justify retaliatory attacks, a new period of communal strife could beckon in Sri Lanka. While the government needs to look at improving and strengthening various security and social structures in its counter-terrorism efforts, community leaders and religious organisations must be encouraged and facilitated to play a critical role in guiding their respective flocks to maintain peace and harmony within Sri Lanka.

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³³ “Gotabaya Rajapakse Confirms Presidential Run in Anxious Sri Lanka,” *Al-Jazeera News*, 18 May 2019, [https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/exclusive-sri-lankan-ex-defence-](https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/exclusive-sri-lankan-ex-defence-chief-gotabaya-says-he-will-run-for-president-tackle-radical-islam/ar-BBwk5sX)

[chief-gotabaya-says-he-will-run-for-president-tackle-radical-islam/ar-BBwk5sX](https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/exclusive-sri-lankan-ex-defence-chief-gotabaya-says-he-will-run-for-president-tackle-radical-islam/ar-BBwk5sX).

³⁴ Interview conducted with Professor Rohan Gunaratna in Singapore on 18 May 2019

Rohingya Crisis and Western Myanmar's Evolving Threat Landscape

Iftekharul Bashar

Synopsis

This article analyses the threat western Myanmar faces from the two main non-state actors claiming to be fighting for the Rohingya Muslim minority community - (i) Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army and (ii) the so-called Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda.¹ Given the nature of these threats, western Myanmar continues to be subject to instabilities arising from ethnic and religious divides, leading to the appeal of Islamist radicalism as a perceived solution among segments of the affected Muslim community. For long-lasting peace, Myanmar should take a comprehensive approach that incorporates inclusion, social cohesion and communal harmony, instead of a counter-insurgency focus only.

Introduction

In recent years, Myanmar has attracted the international spotlight for its fight against a Rohingya Muslim insurgency in the Rakhine state's northern border near Bangladesh. The latter insurgency started in October 2016, when a little known group known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked Myanmar's border check-posts and killed 13 security personnel. As of May 2019 it remains a low-intensity conflict. However, there continues to be a protracted refugee situation for 1.1 million Rohingya Muslims stranded in Bangladesh.² This prolonged refugee crisis has been and continues to be exploited by various transnational terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State (IS); threats that need to be looked into and addressed. In this context, this article analyses the threat level from these non-state actors to Myanmar – ARSA and IS/AQ.

¹ The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army is an ethno-nationalist group while Al-Qaeda and Islamic State are Islamist extremist terrorist groups. Myanmar also faces an active threat from the Arakan Army, which is a Rakhine insurgent group, focusing on protecting

The article recommends a more comprehensive and multi-stakeholder strategy to address the multiple and interlinked problems emanating from western Myanmar's Rakhine state. It argues that groups such as IS and AQ and their network of affiliates will continue to compete for influence in Western Myanmar and other parts of South and Southeast Asia. This makes it essential to acknowledge the potential flashpoints and to address social grievances and ensure social cohesion within western Myanmar.

Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army: Low-Intensity Threat

The Rohingya rebellion against the state is not new and can be traced to the earlier days of Myanmar's independence. In the past, Rohingya rebels had secessionist intentions, but they have become more moderate over the last few decades. Their demands now focus on a legal recognition of their ethnic identity and citizenship. ARSA emerged in the aftermath of the June 2012 communal riots in western Myanmar, but it was formally launched in 2016. ARSA claims that it is fighting for the rights of the Rohingyas and is not linked to any terrorist groups. ARSA attracted media attention after it claimed responsibility for attacking Myanmar border posts in October 2016 that killed more than a dozen security forces. The ensuing clearance operations by Myanmar authorities have been highly controversial as it was seen to be heavy-handed and resulted in a mass exodus of Rohingyas to Bangladesh. ARSA's current status remains unclear particularly due to a sudden drop in the number of attacks.

the rights and identity of the ethnic Arakans. The Arakan Army is beyond the scope of this article.

² Though 740,000 Rohingyas are believed to have crossed over to Bangladesh since 2016, there are Rohingya refugees from previous influxes.

However, its networks are believed to be intact.

Weaker ARSA but threat remains

From an operational point of view, ARSA poses a low-level threat compared to the Arakan Army (AA), a Rakhine Buddhist armed group operating in the same region which has been under heavy Myanmar military operations since January this year. ARSA operations are much less sophisticated.³ There are no official estimates regarding ARSA's current strength. While ARSA has weakened in Myanmar, there are reports that the group is becoming more active in Bangladesh, where more than 1.1 million Rohingyas are living as refugees. This is due to ARSA's exploitation of the refugee crisis especially since late 2018.⁴ This crisis has allowed ARSA to continue recruitment operations among the Rohingya people. In 2019, ARSA carried out two relatively small-scale attacks on Myanmar security forces.⁵ ARSA is believed to be supported by the Rohingya diaspora and has strong links to Rohingyas living in Malaysia. The key weakness of ARSA is its lack of access to sophisticated weapons and explosives. As a result, the group mostly conducts hit-and-run operations. ARSA does not have any permanent training ground similar to AA in Kachin state of northern Myanmar.

According to some sources, ARSA has an active presence in refugee camps, but there is no substantial evidence to back the claim and Bangladesh has officially denied the allegation.⁶ In 2018, ARSA shifted from a Myanmar-facing insurgent model to a network that routinely employ intimidation and violence (e.g. disappearances and killings of Rohingyas who oppose them).

³ Interview with an analyst in Myanmar Institute of Peace Studies (MIPS), May 2019.

⁴ Interview with a personnel of the Bangladesh Police, April 2019.

⁵ Myint, Moe, "Govt Reports 2nd ARSA Attack in Northern Rakhine State This Month," *The Irrawaddy*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/govt-reports-2nd-arsa-attack-northern-rakhine-state-month.html>.

⁶ "ARSA, Arakan Army Bases: Dhaka protests 'baseless' claim by Myanmar," *The Daily Star*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/world/south->

Outlook

ARSA also appears to have been suffering from internal disputes⁷ with the group increasingly getting involved in various crimes such as murder, robbery and looting of weapons of the law enforcement agencies across the border in Rohingya refugee camps.⁸ Bangladeshi authorities have claimed that at least 14 criminal groups are active in the Rohingya refugee camps of which some are reportedly linked to ARSA. The most active ARSA faction is locally known as the Hakim Bahini (Hakim Group named after Abdul Hakim, a Rohingya refugee from Maungdaw, Rakhine state).⁹ ARSA's key advantage is its deep integration within the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh and active contacts with the Rohingya diaspora overseas.

ARSA's area of operations will remain limited to northern Rakhine state near the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. Without any external support in terms of sanctuary, finances, arms and ammunitions, it will be challenging for ARSA to pose a lethal threat to the Myanmar state. However, ARSA will continue to survive unless the Rohingya refugee crisis comes to an end, which may put a stop to its diasporic support.

Transnational Islamist Terrorist Groups: Emerging Threat

The Islamist terrorist threat to Myanmar from IS and AQ is facilitated by three key factors. First, the persecution of the Rohingya community in Rakhine state is leading to grievances, triggering motivations for revenge and the possibility of the affected community joining terrorist groups. Secondly, the presence of IS and AQ, coupled with attempts to recruit within the South and Southeast Asia region to assert their presence, makes the

[asia/news/dhaka-blasts-myanmar-allegation-arsa-bases-bangladesh-1685146](https://www.thedailystar.net/world/south-asia/news/dhaka-blasts-myanmar-allegation-arsa-bases-bangladesh-1685146).

⁷ At least 17 Rohingya refugees have been killed in internal disputes in Bangladesh from January to May 2019.

⁸ "Gangs taking control of Bangladesh Rohingya camps, report warns", *Frontier Myanmar*, April 25, 2019, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/gangs-taking-control-of-bangladesh-rohingya-camps-report-warns>.

⁹ "14 Rohingya Criminal Groups active in Cox's Bazar," *The Prothom Alo*, May 27, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ZfuC3M>.

local communities vulnerable to Islamist radicalisation.

The Rohingya issue has featured prominently in social media posts from members and supporters of AQ and IS. The conflict on the ground is portrayed within the frame of religion i.e. Rohingya Muslims versus the Buddhist military - boosting the narrative of Muslim victimhood. AQ is exploiting the Rohingya crisis by framing it within an Islamic eschatological narrative known as 'Ghazwatul Hind'. Ghazwa is an Arabic word that means battle, and Al-Hind generally denotes the Indian Subcontinent/South Asian region, which roughly encompasses Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and, to some extent, the Rakhine state of western Myanmar (aka Arakan). The concept of 'Ghazwatul Hind' is premised primarily on three hadiths (Prophetic Sayings) which refer to the Indian subcontinent. The sayings glorify the status of those who will participate in the battle which has been described as the 'Ghazwatul Hind.'

For example, on 13 April 2019, one of Al Qaeda's media production houses "Ummah Network" uploaded a YouTube video message by its Bengali ideologue Shaikh Tamim Al Adnani.¹⁰ The 25-minute-long video titled "Ghazwa-e-Hind is knocking your door" asserted Arakan as part of a global crisis facing the Muslim community. The video further exhorted Muslims to rise against "apostate" forces against Islam in the Muslim regions perceived to be under attack.

Al-Qaeda and Associates

AQ and its associates have long been exploiting the Rohingya issue. However, the more recent surge in their narrative came in the aftermath of the June 2012 communal

riots in western Myanmar.¹¹ Since then, AQ and its associated groups have continued to issue statements, produce audio and video messages that showed the group's intention to target Myanmar and local security forces. For example, in June 2017, AQ's 'Code of Conduct' booklet identified Myanmar as part of its theatre of operations and specifically identified the Myanmar military as one of its key targets. The group clearly laid out its three objectives in Myanmar: (i) 'Helping and defending' Muslims in Myanmar; (ii) 'Avenging' the oppression of Myanmar Muslims by the military; and (iii) "Retaking" the Islamic Arakan from the 'occupying' military.¹² In 2017, AQ's Bengali language magazine published a special issue covering the plight of the Rohingyas and called for Muslims to fight against Myanmar.¹³ A report published in the Bangladeshi media in December 2018 claimed that at least 40 Rohingyas have been recruited in the name of humanitarian activities by AQ-inspired Jamaatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB), one of the oldest militant groups in Bangladesh.¹⁴ The group renamed itself to Jamaatul Mujahideen (JuM) and opened a new chapter in India in 2018. Earlier in 2013, JMB took part in a bomb attack on a Buddhist shrine in India to avenge the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. In December 2018, Bangladeshi authorities seized large quantities of commando knives meant to carry out killings, with evidence that local networks were trying to assemble Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in Myanmar.¹⁵ Besides this, there are also concerns about inadequate mainstream educational facilities for Rohingya refugee children. As a result, they are pushed to study in newly established madrassas (religious schools) believed to have links with hardline Islamists in Bangladesh.¹⁶

¹⁰ Ummah Network (Shaikh Tamim Al Adnani), "The Prophecy of Ghazwatul Hind is knocking your door", YouTube Video, 24:14, April 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xi1bd3FqVds>.

¹¹ Iftekhharul Bashar, "Communal harmony: a missing cornerstone of reform in Myanmar", *East Asia Forum*, June 27, 2013, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/06/27/communal-harmony-a-missing-cornerstone-of-reform-in-myanmar/>

¹² As-Sahab Media Subcontinent, "Code of Conduct: Al Qaeda in the Subcontinent," June 2017.

¹³ Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, *Al Balagh*, 2017

¹⁴ Arifur Rahman Rabbi, "At least 40 Rohingyas recruited by JMB" *The Daily Star*, December 14, 2018,

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2018/12/14/at-least-40-rohingyas-recruited-by-jmb>.

¹⁵ Nuruzzaman Labu, "Militant Activities in the Rohingya Camps: Plan to Carry Out Attack During Election conundrum," *The Bangla Tribune*, December 13, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2JUHU1Z>.

¹⁶ C. Christine Fair, "Rohingya: Victims of a Great Game East". *The Washington Quarterly*, 41:3, 63-85, DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2018.1519356.

Islamic State

IS is an emerging threat within Myanmar for two key reasons. First, the group has expressed its intention to target Myanmar. Second, IS networks have reportedly been recruiting Rohingya refugees, who could be used to conduct attacks in Myanmar or its interests overseas. IS has expressed intentions to exploit the Rohingya issue several times and some sources suggest that the group plans to use Bangladeshi territory to launch attacks in Myanmar. In May 2019, Malaysian authorities arrested two Rohingyas along with Indonesians and Malaysians for allegedly plotting IS 'wolf pack' attacks in the country.¹⁷

IS' targeting of Myanmar is well-documented over several years. In a speech on 1 July 2014 when he declared the establishment of a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi alluded to the Rohingyas as being among the 'oppressed' Muslim populations worldwide that IS wanted to fight for.¹⁸ In September 2015, IS' Furat Media published an article titled 'Bangladesh and the Declaration of the Caliphate' which called for armed jihad in Myanmar, originating from Bangladesh. IS has also used its online publication Dabiq¹⁹ to state its intention to establish a base in Bangladesh to launch revenge attacks in Myanmar over the latter's treatment of Rohingya Muslims. For example, Issue 12 of Dabiq in November 2015 stated IS' plan to expand in South Asia by establishing a base in Bangladesh, which would be a springboard for its expansion into India and Myanmar.²⁰

If IS were to establish a strong foothold in Bangladesh, it would be easier to expand its

¹⁷ "Malaysian police foil terror attacks with arrests of four suspects," *ChannelNews Asia*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-police-foiled-terror-attacks-assassination-ramadan-11528788>.

¹⁸ Imran Vittachi, "Islamic State, Other Islamist Groups Exploit Plight of The Rohingya," *Benarnews*, May 11, 2015, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/rohingya-06112015174307.html>.

¹⁹ 15 issues of Dabiq were published and the magazine was replaced by a new one named Rumiya. Both Dabiq and Rumiya have ceased publication currently.

²⁰ *Dabiq*, Issue 12, November 2015

²¹ "ISIS claims 'province' in India for first time after clash in Kashmir," *The Straits Times*, May 11, 2019,

operations into Myanmar. The porous border between Bangladesh and Myanmar provides a suitable terrain for insurgent operations by radical groups. It is noteworthy that in May 2019, IS claimed for the first time that it has established a "province" (wilayat) in India and subsequently one in Pakistan.²¹ Should IS declare a new wilayat in Bangladesh, it is likely to include Myanmar's Rakhine state; there is evidence of existing cross border linkages between IS cells in India and Bangladesh. IS may capitalise on its JuM contacts, which already has a pro-IS faction.

The recent discovery by Malaysian authorities that IS-linked groups have recruited Rohingya refugees further demonstrates the known risk that the Rohingya crisis can be exploited even beyond the Bangladesh-Myanmar border region.²² It is noteworthy that in August 2016, Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi was singled out by IS as a possible target in a 'kill list' sent to Malaysian police.²³ In November 2016, the Indonesian police thwarted an attempt by a local pro-IS extremist group to carry out a bombing attack on the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta.

In cyberspace, regional online extremists have sought to capitalise on the issue, pledging their support through profile pictures with the IS flag and relevant hashtags. Online extremists in Indonesia have expressed a desire to wage jihad on behalf of the Rohingyas and made reference to their hopes of bringing fighters into Myanmar. These online narratives highlight that the Rohingya issue remains a convenient plot to be manipulated by transnational Islamist terrorist groups.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/isis-claims-province-in-india-for-first-time-after-clash-in-kashmir>; Ayaz Gul, "Islamic State Announces 'Pakistan Province'," *Voice of America*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-announces-pakistan-province/4918903.html>.

²² "IS recruiting Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, says anti-terror chief," *Today*, August 27, 2018, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/recruiting-rohingya-refugees-malaysia-says-anti-terror-chief>.

²³ "Myanmar to Increase Security For Aung San Suu Kyi After ISIS Death Threat," *Radio Free Asia*, 3 August, 2016.

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-to-increase-security-for-aung-san-suu-kyi-after-isis-death-threat-08032016151415.html>.

Outlook

Disgruntled and disenfranchised segments of Rohingyas in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Malaysia remain vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment by local IS and AQ networks. The threat to Myanmar does not only involve attacks within Myanmar, but also attacks targeting its diplomatic missions and businesses overseas. The infrastructure projects in Rakhine state are also potential targets of terrorist groups. The possibility of AQ and IS penetration into Rohingya refugee camps remains a threat as the resolution of the Rohingya refugee crisis seems unlikely in the current period. Growing Buddhist nationalism and radicalism in Myanmar is also believed to be a key factor that is contributing to radicalisation among pockets of Rohingya Muslims – making groups such as AQ and IS attractive options. Apart from the transnational terrorist groups, ARSA also presents a threat, even if it's weaker than the threat posed by groups like AQ and IS. ARSA is active in Rohingya camps in Bangladesh and this may pose a problem in the future.

Way Forward

Current developments in western Myanmar indicate that the situation is far from resolved, and the Rohingya refugee crisis could continue to be exploited by jihadist groups in the region and abroad. Even though ARSA seems to have weakened and become fragmented, it is still evolving – especially with its recruitment operations - and it remains to be seen how it adapts to the security environment along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. ARSA's failure may potentially bring in more hard-line elements like AQ and IS into the picture. In order to restore peace and security in Rakhine state, Myanmar should recalibrate its strategy. In order to counter ARSA, Myanmar needs to take a more population-centric approach, promote social cohesion and communal harmony, ensure better policing and community engagement, rather than a single focus on counter-insurgency operations. Myanmar should also continue to work on creating a safe and secure environment for the Rohingyas to be repatriated from Bangladesh and elsewhere.

While a vast majority of Rohingya refugees remain peaceful, segments of them are vulnerable to AQ and IS ideologies. Myanmar

needs to build its capacity, particularly for disrupting future attacks, and work closely with Bangladesh to ensure the safe and voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya refugees. Although granting Myanmar citizenship for the Rohingya community remains highly challenging for Myanmar authorities, giving legal recognition to the Rohingyas may strengthen moderate Rohingyas and marginalise the hardliners. Buddhist nationalism and extremism should also be addressed, with the state promoting communal harmony rather than isolating certain ethnic and religious communities such as the Rohingya Muslims. Building a cohesive society based on well-managed inter-religious relations will also help in challenging the extremist narratives such as those propagated by AQ and IS.

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Far-Right Terrorism: The Christchurch Attack and Potential Implications on the Asia Pacific Landscape

Jade Hutchinson

Synopsis

The terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand is a landmark in far-right terrorist behaviour within the Asia Pacific (APAC) region. The Australian far-right terrorist held both domestic and transitional connections to other far-right extremist groups and travelled extensively before committing the attack in New Zealand. The assailant's proficiency with weaponry and technology is considerable, as is his relationship with the online far-right community. However, little discussion is made about this incident as an evolutionary step for far-right terrorism and how it could impact the region. Accordingly, this article examines the Christchurch far-right terrorist attack, how this attack may impact the future of far-right terrorism and what are the responses to the attack by politicians and tech companies. The article finds the assailant's behaviour significant for far-right terrorist behaviour in the APAC region with the potential for mimetic instances in the region.

Introduction

Far-right extremists are becoming increasingly aware of the recognition granted to their brand of terrorism. Far-right extremists acknowledge that the source of recognition comes from their online community who will celebrate them for their efforts long after the Christchurch attack. The bridge between the localised commission of far-right terrorism offline and the international community of far-right extremists is virtually joined through the use of the Internet and social media. While inherently transnational and socially supportive, online sub-cultures cultivate

solidarity and offer a direction for far-right extremists.¹ These characteristics of contemporary far-right extremism were featured in the 2019 far-right terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand. The attack became a cause for concern, raising questions about the future of far-right extremism in Australia, reactionary responses from opposing ideological groups in APAC, and the potential for mimetic instances of far-right terrorism across the globe. Although analyses of the potential and lethality of far-right terrorism are well documented, there is little discussion about this incident as an evolutionary step for far-right terrorism and how it could impact the region, if at all. Accordingly, this article examines the attack, the assailant, the ideological narratives, the techno-social conditions that supported the Christchurch attack, the implications of far-right terrorism in the region, and what are the responses to the attack by politicians and tech companies. Through this examination, it is found that the assailant's relationship with the far-right virtual community and attitude towards venerating the online sub-culture, along with his proficiency with Internet technology and mass-violence weaponry, is significant for far-right terrorist behaviour in the Asia Pacific region (APAC).

The Christchurch Attack

(i) The Incident

On 15 March, two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand were targeted by an Australian far-right terrorist and 51 worshippers were killed. The attack is a landmark in far-right terrorist behaviour in APAC. For instance, the

¹ Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens, "White Pride Worldwide: Constructing Global Identities Online," In *The Globalisation of Hate: Internationalising Hate Crime?* Jennifer Scheppe and Mark A. Walters (Oxford University Press, 2016); Ryan Matthew,

"Understanding the Collective Identity of the Radical Right Online: A Mixed-Methods Approach," Simon Fraser University, September 7, 2017, <http://summit.sfu.ca/item/17632>.

assailant's proficiency with techno-social technology, the unprecedented support offered by the online community following the attack, the transnational perspective present in the assailant's manifesto coupled with his international experience of traveling abroad, and the ideological expressions exhibited by the assailant are, once combined, characteristically advanced behaviour for far-right terrorism comparative to past incidences of far-right terrorism sourced from Australia. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) referred to the far-right terrorist attack as 'the latest indication that violent white supremacists pose an international terrorist threat', and this 'can inspire others like never before'.² Likewise, Ravndal recounts the characteristics of the attack 'to represent a new trend of mass-casualty attacks carried out by individuals who self-radicalised online with limited interaction with organised extreme-right actors'.³ Subsequently, the Christchurch attack has become the focus of analyses seeking to understand contemporary far-right terrorist behaviour and its relationship with the online community.

(ii) The Assailant

Although supported by several accomplices, the attacker who executed the physical assault is an Australian far-right terrorist – Brenton Tarrant. During his preparations for the attack, Tarrant wrote a manifesto to record his mindset and ideological disposition for online distribution. Reminiscent of past Islamist radical groups, the article was uploaded to a number of small-scale file sharing sites, such as Solidfiles, MediaFire,

Mega.nz, and ZippyShare. It was then uploaded to large-scale, popular social media sites, such as Twitter, Facebook and 8chan, and then re-shared across many platforms, such as BitChute, Youtube, and LiveLeak.⁴ The manifesto represented Tarrant's desire to gain maximum attention, communicate an ideological position and validate the online far-right extremist community where he perceived himself as a member.⁵ As the manifesto was replete with far-right extremist colloquialisms and sardonic rhetorical passages, its significance seemed to be subliminal to those outside the sub-culture or without intellectual insights on the community. However, the assailant's writings revealed valuable information about the incentives that orientate the online community, or the psychology of the individual's relationship with the online community and collective identity. Further qualitative analyses are required to evaluate the text's potential to provide any insight on contemporary far-right terrorism.

During the attack, the assailant successfully self-filmed and live-streamed the attack using a body cam and, in advance, highlighted the location of the live-stream (live-feed) within the manifesto and online. This crude bridging of the far-right terrorist's reality with his online community exemplified a devastatingly effective means of securing notoriety for himself and his ideological disposition.⁶ Circulating self-documented, live-footage of a terrorist event in the contemporary online context is a concrete pathway to community recognition for extremists.⁷ For instance, Stuart applied criminological theory to the spectacle dimension of this far-right terrorist

² "ADL: New Zealand Mosque Attack Shows That White Supremacy Is an International Terror Threat," *Anti-Defamation League*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-new-zealand-mosque-attack-shows-that-white-supremacy-is-an-international>.

³ Jacob Ravndal, "Is Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence on the Rise?" *Center for Research on Extremism*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/is-right-wing-terrorism-and-violence-on-the-rise.html>.

⁴ "Analysis: New Zealand Attack and the Terrorist Use of the Internet," *Tech Against Terrorism*, 2019, <https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/2019/03/26/analysis-new-zealand-attack-and-the-terrorist-use-of-the-internet/>; "New Zealand Attack and the Terrorist Use of the Internet," *VOX*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.voxpol.eu/analysis-new-zealand-attack-and-the-terrorist-use-of-the-internet/>.

⁵ Bruce Hoffman, "The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists - Before the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence United States House of Representatives," *RAND*, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimnies/2006/RAND_CT262-1.pdf;

Taylor Lorenz, "The Christchurch Shooter's Manifesto Is Meant to Troll: The Violent Rhetoric Was Written for an Audience," *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/the-shooters-manifesto-was-designed-to-troll/585058/>.

⁶ Stuart Bender, "Social Media Creates a Spectacle Society That Makes It Easier for Terrorists to Achieve Notoriety," *VOX*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.voxpol.eu/social-media-creates-a-spectacle-society-that-makes-it-easier-for-terrorists-to-achieve-notoriety/>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

attack and characterised it as an act of 'performance crime'.⁸ Particularly, given the assailant's use of social media as the platform in which he pedestaled his performance online, it can be considered a 'will-to-representation performance'.⁹ According to Surette, this conceptualisation characterised crimes that 'are committed as part of a new media content production agenda aimed at recording, and disseminating acts as a means of self-representation and promotion'.¹⁰ However, livestreaming the event was significant because it also created a direct connection to the online audience and provided personal content for online viewers. This connection cultivated a sense of propinquity between offline actors and online viewers, which may propel popular perceptions of the assailant as acting on behalf of the far-right online community. This grant of recognition and affinity for the assailant can motivate other members of the online community to commit similar acts.

This expression of dedication, showmanship and solidarity with the online community, rewards far-right terrorists with a profusion of additional viewers, ideologically sympathetic or otherwise. For instance, the Director of the SITE Intelligence Group, Rita Katz, stated that 'the wave of [far-right extremist] online support that the Christchurch attack continues to attract is unlike the response to any other right-wing attack'.¹¹ This is not to say that online users are newly attracted to violent

terrorism-related media, or that the production of violent body-cam footage is new or unique to the Christchurch attack. Among other groups, the so-called Islamic State (IS) has produced self-filmed footage of violent battle scenes to feed their propaganda efforts for offshore recruitment.¹² However, simultaneously executing a terrorist attack using sophisticated weaponry and explosives, while self-filming a live-stream on social media, not only highlights the use of instructional information in warfare tactics but a terrorist attack designed to be appreciated online. Although the integration of battlefield filming with extremist violence may be considered mimetic of past extremist groups, its far-right extremist use is new to the APAC region. This raises questions about the life and relationships of the Australian assailant who may have recognised the precedence of his actions.

(iii) *The Links: Home and Abroad*

The assailant had travelled extensively before reaching New Zealand. He visited places such as Pakistan, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Germany, Hungary, Serbia, Montenegro, North Korea, France, Portugal and other areas of Europe and Asia.¹³ These travels raised a post-attack investigation stretching across multiple continents and several intelligence agencies. The investigation highlighted the various connections and relationships

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Majid Yar, "Crime, Media and the Will-to-Representation: Reconsidering Relationships in the New Media Age," *Crime, Media, Culture* 8, no. 3 (2012): 245–60.

¹⁰ Raymond Surette, "Performance Crime and Justice," *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 27, no. 2 (2015): 195.

¹¹ Nick O'Malley, "Unprecedented" Surge of Online Extremism after Christchurch," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 20, 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/unprecedented-surge-of-online-extremism-after-christchurch-20190420-p51fss.html>.

¹² Bruce Hoffman, "The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists - Before the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence United States House of Representatives," *RAND*, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND_CT262-1.pdf; Adam Linehan, "ISIS Helmet Cam Footage Shows Embarrassing Battlefield Defeat Near Mosul," *Task & Purpose*, April 27, 2016, <https://taskandpurpose.com/isis-helmet-cam-footage-shows-embarrassing-battlefield-defeat-near-mosul>.

¹³ Shibani Mahtani, Wilma McKay, and Kate Shuttleworth, "Hiding in Plain Sight: In Quiet New Zealand City, Alleged Gunman Plotted Carnage," *Washington Post*, March 21, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/hiding-in-plain-sight-in-quiet-new-zealand-city-alleged-gunman-plotted-carnage/2019/03/21/1846de9e-4a7b-11e9-8cfc-2c5d0999c21e_story.html; Linton Besser, "Christchurch Shooter Was Bulgarian Guesthouse's First-Ever Australian Guest," *ABC News*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-01/brenton-tarrant-bulgarian-travels-investigated/10957500>; Helen Regan, and Sandi Sidhu, "Brenton Tarrant: From Gym Trainer to Murder Suspect," *CNN*, March 17, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/16/asia/new-zealand-suspect-brenton-tarrant-about-intl/index.html>; "Suspected Christchurch Shooter Sent Money to French Group," *DW*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/suspected-christchurch-shooter-sent-money-to-french-group-report/a-48192751>.

retained by the assailant within and outside Australia, online or otherwise.

In Australia, at different times, Tarrant had online relationships with multiple far-right extremist groups, such as the 'United Patriots Front', 'True Blue Crew' and 'The Lads Society'. For instance, although unsuccessful, the President of 'The Lads Society' Tom Sewell admitted to intentionally attempting to recruit the assailant years before the attack in New Zealand.¹⁴ Tarrant expressed his avid support for the 'United Patriots Front' and its leader, Blair Cottrell, with online posts dating back to April 2016.¹⁵ For example, Tarrant revered Cottrell online as an 'emperor' of the Australian far-right movement and his Facebook page was littered with shared white supremacist material and far-right extremist content.¹⁶

The assailant expressed his solidarity with Australian far-right extremist groups online during far-right events. For instance, when President Donald Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States, Tarrant celebrated online alongside far-right leaders, Cottrell and Sewell. Tarrant declared Trump's electoral victory as 'simply one of the most important events in modern history', and recorded in his manifesto that Trump represents 'a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose.'¹⁷ Although admiration

for the United States' President is now common among far-right extremists, it is not commonly recognised as a gesture for far-right extremists to act with impunity. Even if unintended, Trump's exclusive rhetoric (Otherisation) and assertion of Muslims as 'invaders', provides an international authority to maintain the far-right social hierarchy and a focal point for international extremist relationships.¹⁸

Internationally, the Christchurch attack demonstrated the significance of virtual relationships and Internet-based partnerships based on contemporary white supremacy. Jonathan Greenblatt, a representative of ADL, stated the terrorist attack exemplified 'modern white supremacy [as] an international threat that knows no borders, being exported and globalised [sic] like never before.'¹⁹ When he streamed his self-filmed, live-streamed video and linked his internationally-angled manuscript to the Internet, Tarrant embraced the 'international approach' to far-right terrorism.²⁰ Adoption of this approach signals several advances in far-right terrorist behaviour in the APAC region, including: an incremental assimilation of the online and offline domains towards a transient techno-social network of relationships²¹; the internet's practical facilitation of far-right terrorism as a successful instructional, logistical and spectator's tool;²² and the expansion of far-

¹⁴ Patrick Begley, "Australian White Nationalist Group Tried to Recruit Christchurch Terror Attack Accused," *Stuff*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/112400675/australian-white-nationalist-group-tried-to-recruit-christchurch-terror-attack-accused>.

¹⁵ Alex Mann, Kevin Nguyen and Katherine Gregory, "Emperor Cottrell: Accused Christchurch Shooter Had Celebrated Rise of the Australian Far-Right," *ABC News*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-23/christchurch-shooting-accused-praised-blair-cottrell/10930632>.

¹⁶ Ibid; "White Supremacist Terrorist Attack at Mosques in New Zealand," *Anti-Defamation League*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.adl.org/blog/white-supremacist-terrorist-attack-at-mosques-in-new-zealand>; "Brenton Tarrant." archive.li, March 15, 2019. <http://archive.li/9UScB>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Barkun, Michael, "President Trump and the Fringe," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 3 (2017): 437–43; Uri Friedman and Emma Green, "Trump's Speech on Islam, Annotated," *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/trump-speech-on-islam/527535/>;

Tina Nguyen, "The Far-Right Rejoices as Trump Says Immigrants Are Destroying European Culture," *The Hive*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/07/donald-trump-culture-wars-britain>.

¹⁹ "ADL: New Zealand Mosque Attack Shows That White Supremacy Is an International Terror Threat," *Anti-Defamation League*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-new-zealand-mosque-attack-shows-that-white-supremacy-is-an-international>.

²⁰ Phyllis Gerstenfeld, Diana Grant and Chau-Pu Chiang, "Hate Online: A Content Analysis of Extremist Internet Sites," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 3, no.1 (2003): 29–44; Westcott et al, "Dozens Killed in Christchurch Mosque Attack," *CNN World*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/asia/live-news/new-zealand-christchurch-shooting-intl/index.html>.

²¹ Anastasia Powell, Gregory Stratton and Robin Cameron, *Digital Criminology: Crime and Justice in Digital Society* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018).

²² Michael Whine, "Cyberspace-A New Medium for Communication, Command, and Control by Extremists," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 22, no.3

right extremists' considerations to include the transnational well-being of Anglo-Europeans.²³ Accordingly, Ravndal warns that:

'Standard explanations of right-wing terrorism and violence, such as limited political opportunities, interaction with political enemies and how immigration is discussed in the public sphere, may be less relevant for explaining lone actors groomed in transnational online extremist networks.'²⁴

Future research will require novel explanations to account for the dynamism of far-right extremist behaviour, particularly in comparison to other instances of far-right violence in the APAC region. For instance, further analyses into far-right ideological themes and narratives may provide insights to track the trajectory of extremist grievances in the region.

(1999): 231–45; Thomas Holt, "Exploring the Intersections of Technology, Crime, and Terror," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no.2 (2012): 337–54; Paul Gill, Emily Corner, Amy Thornton, and Maura Conway, "What Are the Roles of the Internet in Terrorism? Measuring Online Behaviours of Convicted UK Terrorists," *VOX - Pol*, November 13, 2015, <https://www.voxpol.eu/what-are-the-roles-of-the-internet-in-terrorism/>; Ian Brown and Josh Cows, "Check the Web: Assessing the Ethics and Politics of Policing the Internet for Extremist Material," *Oxford Internet Institute*, <https://www.voxpol.eu/check-the-web/>.

²³ Manuela Caiani and Patricia Kröll, "The Transnationalization of the Extreme Right and the Use of the Internet," *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 39, no.4 (2013): 331–51. These advancements are represented in the assailant's varied relationships with international far-right movements. For instance, Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office relayed Tarrant's financial history with the Austrian Identitarian Movement. The attacker submitted a (SGD) \$3912.47 donation to the Génération Identaire, a French far-right group in September 2017; See "Suspected Christchurch Shooter Sent Money to French Group," *DW*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/suspected-christchurch-shooter-sent-money-to-french-group-report/a-48192751>.

²⁴ Jacob Ravndal, "Is Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence on the Rise?" *Center for Research on Extremism*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/is-right-wing-terrorism-and-violence-on-the-rise.html>.

(iv) Ideological Themes and Narratives

Cultural themes and narratives stimulate our archetypal psychic instincts so as to simplify our reality for survival.²⁵ This reliably leads to oversimplifications and routinely reinforces a narrative constructed in contrast to the opposing intentions of others.²⁶ As 'story telling animals', humans are compelled by narratives - especially those designed to give direction for social cooperation and creating an imaginary sense of community and collective identity.²⁷ Far-right extremist ideology, like other types of extremism, offers themes and narratives of hope, victimhood, 'threat, fear and uncertainty'.²⁸ Commonly held within the context of terrorism and immigration, as it was for the Christchurch attack, these feelings are directed against Muslims and Islam more broadly.²⁹

The discursive sentiment of the Christchurch attacker is shared among far-right extremist movements in Australia and abroad. For instance, while the assailant's Facebook

²⁵ Edward F. Edinger, "An Outline of Analytical Psychology," *A Publication of the Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology*, 1968, https://issuu.com/lewislafontaine1/docs/edward_f_edinger_-_an_outline_of_an

²⁶ Lawrence Leshan, *The Psychology of War: Comprehending Its Mystique and Its Madness* (New York: Helios Press, 2012).

²⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 201; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983), 1-9. Ryan Scrivens, "Understanding the Collective Identity of the Radical Right Online: A Mixed-Methods Approach," *Simon Fraser University*, September 7, 2017, <http://summit.sfu.ca/item/17632>.

²⁸ Michele Grossman, "Disenchantments: Counter-Terror Narratives and Conviviality," In *Cultural, Religious and Political Contestations: The Multicultural Challenge*, Fethi Mansouri (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2015), 71–89; Julian Droogan and Shane Peattie, "Mapping the Thematic Landscape of *Dabiq* Magazine". *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no.6 (2017): 591–620; Julian Droogan and Shane Peattie, "Reading Jihad: Mapping the Shifting Themes of *Inspire* Magazine," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no.4 (2018): 684–717.

²⁹ Halim Rane, Jacqu Ewart and Mohamad Abdalla, *Islam and the Australian News Media* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2010); Samina Yasmeen, "Understanding Muslim Identities: From Perceived Relative Exclusion to Inclusion," *Centre for Muslim States and Societies*, https://www.omi.wa.gov.au/Resources/Publications/Documents/orations/Muslim_Identities_report.pdf.

page, was written and symbolised with sarcastic, derogatory and dark-humoured tones familiar to the Australian far-right extremist movement, his manifesto was titled under the European 'Identitarian' slogan, 'The Great Replacement' (TGR). TGR theory endorses the white supremacist insecurity that 'whites' are experiencing a 'genocide' at the hands of non-Anglo-Europeans. Originally composed by the French author Renaud Camus, the title represents a thematic shift in ideological focus to emphasise cultural superiority and fragility alongside racial fears and purity.³⁰ Regardless, the 'TGR' theory offers a compelling narrative which effectively unites otherwise diasporic extremists under an ideological framework.

This ideological narrative was then framed as Europe's cautionary tale for Australian far-right extremists against a Muslim 'invasion'. This is explicitly illustrated in the assailant's manifesto, writing that:

'this crisis of mass immigration and sub-replacement fertility is an assault on the European people that, if not combated, will ultimately result in the complete racial and cultural replacement of the European people'.³¹

This narrative outline sets the stage for experiences to be reframed and refined as grievances and personal victimisation. The landscape, characters, cause and prescient future are configured to anticipate disturbances of the far-right social order and hierarchy.³² For instance, the assailant's anti-Islamic grievances are met with TGR theory's themes of racial and cultural purity, stating that:

'the only muslim [sic] I truly hate is the convert, those from our own people that turn their backs on their heritage,

turn their backs on their cultures, turn their back on their traditions and become blood traitors to their own race. These I hate'.³³

The Muslim identity is represented as the force of Anglo-European racial and cultural disintegration.³⁴ Following this passage, the assailant foreshadows that 'radical, explosive action is the only desired, and required, response to an attempted genocide'.³⁵ The reactionary threat follows the belief that said 'genocide' has already begun to befall the international Anglo-European community. The victimisation of the Anglo-European community is leveraged as a legitimising factor for reactionary violence, with Muslims increasingly represented at the forefront.

Notions of offensive efforts to confront the 'invasion' are supported by socio-historical nostalgia for Christian medieval wartimes. Numerous white-supremacist references to historical conflicts between Christian Anglo-Europeans and Islamic 'invaders' were scribed and stitched onto the assailant's rifle and backpack.³⁶ Tharoor identified the historical references located on Tarrant's personal possessions, as an 'obsession with a long history of Europeans killing Muslims'.³⁷ Although this obsession was found to be largely historically inaccurate or selective, such nostalgia is found among far-right terrorists. The Norwegian far-right terrorist, Anders Breivik, also styled himself with anachronistic titles such as the 'crusading Templar knight'.³⁸ History, empirical or imaginary, acts to legitimise extremist interpretations of the present and is promoted as a legacy to re-enact with contemporary actors.

While this is not the space for further analysis of the ideological content in the Christchurch attacker's writings, future research must remain current on far-right extremism online

³⁰ Thomas Williams, "The French Origins of "You Will Not Replace Us," *The New Yorker*, November 27, 2017,

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-french-origins-of-you-will-not-replace-us>.

³¹ Brenton Tarrant, *The Great Replacement*, 2019, 3.

³² Christopher Parker, "The Radical Right in the United States of America," *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, April 2018,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274559.013.31>.

³³ Ibid: 12.

³⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1966).

³⁵ Ibid, 34.

³⁶ Ishaan Tharoor, "The Warped History That Fuels Right-Wing Terrorism," *Washington Post*, March 22, 2019,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/03/22/warped-history-that-fuels-right-wing-terrorism/>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

or otherwise, and comprehensively map the ideological landscape that accommodates it. Additional public and academic discourses on how to identify the various elements of far-right extremism, are required to expose far-right attempts to shroud sentiments of racism and cultural superiority.

Possible Impact on Australia and APAC

(i) Reactions and Responses

The far-right terrorist attack in Christchurch has the potential to ignite reactionary violence and spur mimetic instances of far-right terrorism. For instance, the SITE Intelligence Group 'detected calls for revenge attacks against Australians by Muslim extremists'.³⁹ SITE identified a message displayed alongside depictions of the shooting at the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, which called on Islamist extremists to:

'sharpen your knife'... 'If you find ... kuffar travelers [*sic*] from the land of Australia, then stab him!'... 'If you find they are on the beach, then kill them! If you find those kufr immigrants coming to your country and setting their dirty foot [*sic*], then kill him!'.⁴⁰

Such exclamations of reactionary violence threaten to accelerate a dialectic of 'cumulative extremism' between far-right and Islamist extremists, and prompt mimetic instances of far-right violence.⁴¹ For instance, 19-year old John Earnest executed a far-right

terrorist attack on a synagogue in San Diego, United States on 27 April 2019 and killed one.⁴² Similar to the Christchurch attacker, the San Diego assailant published a manifesto online hours before executing the attack with a proposed link to a live-stream of the event. The manifesto was written in a similar format and derogatory style and the assailant participated and projected content within similar online spaces. The assailant also targeted a centre for religious worship using an assault rifle, and publicly admired the Christchurch attacker among other past far-right terrorists.⁴³ Future responses and reactions using extremist violence may continue to spur a dialectic of extremism and terrorism. However, it must be stated that although there is a perceivable dialectic connection between such far-right and jihadi exclamations of violence and acts of terrorism, it is important not to view these acts as purely reactionary. Future research must analyse each incident in isolation before considering its historical links to opposing ideological groups that provide inspiration for present attacks, to avoid causal conjectures.

(ii) Online Sub-Cultures

The far-right extremist sub-culture online orientates individual attitudes using actionable information for members.⁴⁴ Schiano illustrates the impression of the Christchurch attack on these digital spaces:

'Newer shooters since the New Zealand massacre have also played directly into online subcultures that promise to reward alienated young

³⁹ Nick O'Malley, "Unprecedented" Surge of Online Extremism after Christchurch," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 20, 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/unprecedented-surge-of-online-extremism-after-christchurch-20190420-p51fss.html>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Roger Eatwell, Roger, "Community Cohesion and Cumulative Extremism in Contemporary Britain," *The Political Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2006): 204-216; Julia Ebner, *The Rage The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

⁴² Alexia Underwood, "Here's What We Know so Far about the Poway Synagogue Shooting," *Vox*, April 29, 2019,

<https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/4/29/18522544/poway-synagogue-california-shooting-passover>.

⁴³ Ibid; Collins, Ben, and Andrew Blankstein, "Anti-Semitic Open Letter Posted under Name of

Synagogue Shooting Suspect," *NBC News*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/anti-semitic-open-letter-posted-online-under-name-chabad-synagogue-n999211>; Deanna Paul and Katie Mettler, "Authorities Identify Suspect in "Hate Crime" Synagogue Shooting That Left 1 Dead, 3 Injured," *Washington Post*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/04/27/california-synagogue-shooting-multiple-injuries/>.

⁴⁴ Willem Koster and Dick Houtman, "Stormfront Is Like a Second Home to Me," *Information, Communication & Society* 11, no.8 (2008): 1155-76; Michael Whine, "Cyberspace-A New Medium for Communication, Command, and Control by Extremists," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 22, no.3 (1999): 231-245; Charlie Edwards and Luke Gibbon, "Pathways to Violent Extremism in the Digital Era," *The RUSI Journal* 158, no.5 (2013): 40-47.

men with praise and attention if they kill for the cause of white supremacy.’⁴⁵

Such impressions are advanced on online platforms such as ‘Discord’, which provides users with server-space to construct social environments without the same rhetorical opprobrium placed on Facebook or Twitter users. Highlighting one such server-space titled, ‘Outer Heaven’, Schiano stresses the potentiality of the online sub-culture to share manuals on how to commit mass-violence, share contacts to attain or construct improvised explosive devices, and disseminate ideological rhetoric celebrating past far-right terrorist attacks and threats to commit similar acts.⁴⁶ Websites, such as the recently removed ‘Fascist Forge’, provide far-right extremists with similar means to socialise extreme-ideological sentiment and information to execute mass-violence.⁴⁷ These online spaces are emboldened by the Christchurch attack and are becoming increasingly central in the preparation of far-right terrorism.

This is not to say that these online sub-cultures are reserved for the ‘dark’ or unpopular corners of the internet. Ahmed and PISOIU highlight the impact of sharing similar content across more popular social media platforms such as Twitter, stating that:

‘The combination of contemporary discursive innovations and of contemporary populist repertoires – such as personal attacks, crude, simple and bold language, the use of

social media, dramatic videos, and visuals in general – has in fact resurrected and rebranded an existing ideational potential, and has in effect united the far right.’⁴⁸

Further, the boundaries between mainstream social media and the ‘dark web’ is illusory. By leveraging algorithms on social media sites, content is circulated largely unfettered between these previously considered distinct areas of the internet.⁴⁹ This bridges the distance between a far-right sympathiser on Twitter and a far-right violent extremist on ‘Discord’ or a website like ‘Fascist Forge’.

Additionally, the algorithmic architecture used in these social online spaces is largely endorsing of extreme beliefs and intolerant attitudes.⁵⁰ For instance, social media sites, such as Twitter, enhance the impact of political fragmentation among its online cohorts.⁵¹ Political fragmentation de-engineers the positive propensities provided by an analogue democratic social space, whereby a citizen’s participation is more valuable if privy and tolerant to a range of political opinions. Bright (2018) confirms that:

‘the real area of separation appears to occur with people who hold extreme ideologies, who become separated both from people of other viewpoints and even people who hold more moderate versions of their viewpoint. This may indicate that the most important factor is... the certainty with which people hold

⁴⁵ Chris Schiano, “Neo-Nazis Use Discord Chats to Promote New Zealand Copycat Shootings,” *Unicorn Riot*, May 10, 2019,

<https://unicornriot.ninja/2019/neo-nazis-use-discord-chats-to-promote-new-zealand-copycat-shootings/>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Chris Schiano, “Neo-Nazis Use Discord Chats to Promote New Zealand Copycat Shootings,” *Unicorn Riot*, May 10, 2019,

<https://unicornriot.ninja/2019/neo-nazis-use-discord-chats-to-promote-new-zealand-copycat-shootings/>;

Sarah Berman, Mack Lamoureux, and Natalie Alcoba, “Fascist Forge, the Online Neo-Nazi Recruitment Forum, Is Down,” *Vice*, February 15, 2019,

https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/43zn8j/fascist-forge-the-online-neo-nazi-recruitment-forum-is-down.

⁴⁸ Reem Ahmed and Daniela PISOIU, “What Does the “New Right” Have to Do With the Christchurch

Attack? Some Evidence from Twitter on Discursive Overlaps,” *VOX*, April 17, 201,

<https://www.voxpol.eu/what-does-the-new-right-have-to-do-with-the-christchurch-attack-some-evidence-from-twitter-on-discursive-overlaps/>.

⁴⁹ Geert Lovink, “Algorithmic Hate: Brenton Tarrant and the Dark Social Web by Luke Munn,” *Institute of Network Cultures*, March 19, 2019,

<http://networkcultures.org/blog/2019/03/19/luke-munn-algorithmic-hate-brenton-tarrant-and-the-dark-social-web/>.

⁵⁰ Natascha Just and Michael Latzer, “Governance by Algorithms: Reality Construction by Algorithmic Selection on the Internet,” *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no.2 (2019): 238–58.

⁵¹ Jonathan Bright, “Explaining the Emergence of Political Fragmentation on Social Media: The Role of Ideology and Extremism,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 23, no.1 (1018): 17–33.

beliefs, rather than ideological differences between individuals.⁵²

Future research into far-right extremist subcultures online must account for the manipulation and influence of algorithms in social online spaces. Legislative measures to curb this influence may provide support to counter violent extremist efforts online.

(iii) Legislative Change and the Tech Sector

In response to the Christchurch attack, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and French President Emmanuel Macron are using political collaboration to tackle online extremism. Titled the 'Christchurch Call', the political initiative calls on signatory nations to adopt and enforce laws that eliminate objectionable material online, set guidelines on how to report acts of terrorism in mainstream media streams, and attempt to access greater portions of social media companies' data on individual users.⁵³ The initiative is a voluntary engagement that requires each nation to individually enforce the measures outlined by the agreement. Although the pledge is not enforceable on individual nations, it may provide enough political pressure for social media to advance their strategy to counter violent media.⁵⁴ The drafted pledge has not provided a definition of what violent extremist content is, as each individual signatory will decide what does or does not constitute an appropriate definition. At the time of this article's writing, the United States' signature, along with that of many other APAC nations, are absent from the pledge.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid, 29.

⁵³ Ibid; Charlotte Graham-McLa and Adam Satariano, "New Zealand Seeks Global Support for Tougher Measures on Online Violence," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/technology/ardern-macron-social-media-extremism.html>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Eleanor Roy, "Details Emerge of New Zealand Plan to Tackle Online Extremism," *The Irish Times*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/asia-pacific/details-emerge-of-new-zealand-plan-to-tackle-online-extremism-1.3890324>.

⁵⁶ "Analysis: New Zealand Attack and the Terrorist Use of the Internet," *Tech Against Terrorism*, <https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/2019/03/26/analysis-new-zealand-attack-and-the-terrorist-use-of-the-internet/>; "New Zealand Attack and the Terrorist

Use of the Internet," *VOX*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.voxpol.eu/analysis-new-zealand-attack-and-the-terrorist-use-of-the-internet/>.

The community of large and small-scale technology companies has reacted to the uploading of Tarrant's content and its wide proliferation across their platforms, with various responses and banning of individual users.⁵⁶ However, online users are still able to access archival evidence of the content on various websites and platforms.⁵⁷ This highlights the Sisyphean task ahead for technology companies in attempting to control the spread of prohibited content online.

Conclusion

The far-right terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand has altered the perception of far-right terrorism in the region. The attack features advances in far-right terrorist behaviour and far-right extremist relationships over the Internet. Ever since the Internet has provided individual users with the capacity for instant, mass-socialisation, far-right extremist material and discourse has been disseminated online with advances for recruitment.⁵⁸ Subsequently, the Internet and its multiplicity of evolutionary advancements, has enabled far-right extremism to have an unprecedented reach within the online community.

Accordingly, this article sets out to examine the Christchurch terrorist attack and attacker, what conditions supported this far-right terrorist attack in the APAC region, and what are the potential implications on the future of far-right extremism online and far-right terrorism in the region. Future research must consider the evolving nature and conditions supporting far-right terrorism in the APAC region, how far-right extremists advance their

Use of the Internet," *VOX*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.voxpol.eu/analysis-new-zealand-attack-and-the-terrorist-use-of-the-internet/>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Julie Etchingham, Julie, "Hate.Com Expands on the Net," *BBC News*. January 12, 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/600876.stm>; Les Back, Mitchell Keith, and John Solomos, "Nation and Race: The Developing Euro-American Racist Subculture," In *Racism on the Internet: Mapping Neo-Fascist Subcultures in Cyberspace*, edited by Jeffrey Kaplan and Bjorgo Tore (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998); Jessie Daniels, *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 2009); David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (London and New York: Verso, 2017).

methodologies for mass-violence and how to track the trajectory of far-right extremism online. Combatting far-right extremist material online requires on-going interoperable efforts driven by strong international political and legal frameworks, scholarly insight and cooperation from private telecommunications companies. If far-right extremism is left unchecked, however, the APAC region may likely witness mimetic instances of far-right terrorism and reactionary violence by opposing ideological groups.

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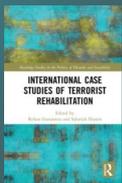
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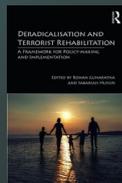


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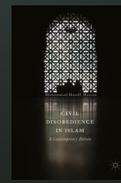
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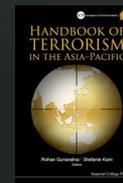
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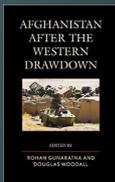
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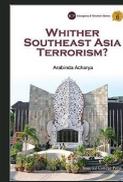
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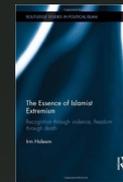
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