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Stabbing Incidents in Australia Reignite Low-Tech Terrorism Concerns

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SYNOPSIS

Two stabbing attacks that took place in Sydney, Australia, recently have reignited concerns over the perpetration of violence using low-tech weapons. The first attack was classified as non-terrorist, while the second attack in a church, was attributed to religiously-motivated terrorism. The latter triggered violent attacks on the police and generated communal tensions, which may have a more lasting impact than the terrorist attack itself. It underscores the importance of social cohesion and resilience in the aftermath of such incidents.

COMMENTARY

Recent incidents of stabbing attacks in Australia have revived the spectre of violence from lone wolves wielding low-tech weapons. Such attacks involving crude household weapons are hard to anticipate or foil. Unlike attacks by organised terrorist groups, lone-wolf activities generate little or no actionable intelligence as these actors do not need to communicate or coordinate with others in their attack preparations.

The [first of the stabbing](#) attacks which killed six people, occurred at the Bondi Junction shopping mall in Sydney, Australia, on 13 April. Australian authorities were later emphatic that the attack was [not terrorism-related](#) but an act of mass violence by a mentally disturbed individual who was known to law enforcement agencies.

Two days later, on 15 April, also in Sydney, [a 16-year-old boy attacked the bishop](#) of the Assyrian Christ The Good Shepherd Church during a live-streamed sermon. The youth had apparently been offended by the [bishop's critical views of Islam](#). This second stabbing incident escalated communal tensions between Assyrian Christians and Muslims in the neighbourhood. A crowd that gathered at the church following the stabbings also attacked law enforcement forces which responded to the incident,

resulting in [serious injury to two police officers](#). The Australian authorities have labelled this second attack as [religiously motivated terrorism](#).

Australia has not seen this type of violence in recent years. Low-tech attacks such as stabbings and vehicle-rammings, became a popular lone-wolf terror tactic when ISIS leader, Mohammad Al-Adnani, called on his followers to [engage in all manner of violence](#) against Western targets, including Australia. This call led to a wave of low-tech violence perpetrated by lone-wolf ISIS terrorists in the West.

There are no indications that the two stabbing incidents resulted from any calls for violence and are likely self-initiated. However, given that the second attack at the church took place only two days after the first and similarly involved the same low-tech tactic, i.e., stabbings with a knife, it is quite possible that the first (non-terrorism-related) attack inspired the second (terrorist) attack.

First Attack Deadly but not Terrorism-Related

With one of the two aforementioned attacks officially labelled as terrorism-related, questions that arise are: why was the first attack not considered terrorist and why correct labelling matter?

In the first attack, which was more violent and deadly than the second, there was no apparent ideology that the attacker had subscribed to. As five of the six victims were women, he is believed to have targeted women specifically. According to his parents, he was angry as he [“couldn’t get a girlfriend”](#).

The specific targeting of women for violence is resonant with the beliefs of involuntary celibates (or incels) – a subculture of people who are unable to get a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one. These people may harbour a misogynistic, right-wing ideology that blames women and feminism for the difficulties faced by men. Some analysts have classified incel beliefs as part of extreme right salad bar ideology.

The attacker in the first stabbing incident was also said to have a long history of mental health issues, but this on its own does not make it a non-terrorist act. In fact, [mental health issues](#) were considered contributing factors in several extreme right-wing terrorist attacks.

According to some analysts, what might actually make the first attack a non-terrorism-related act is that the attacker did not feel that he belonged to a larger movement aiming [“to change the system”](#). It was simply a case of an angry man going on a rampage. Although the attacker might not have subscribed to an extremist ideology, the state of his mental health and his targeting of a specific demography – women in this case – did share some similarities with terrorism cases.

But it is also worth noting that some violent acts that took place in the past were not seen as terrorism or extremism-related at the time of their occurrence but were later suspected to be terrorism-related after more information surfaced.

Whether an attack is labelled as terrorism-related or not does matter. Terrorist acts are often not one-off incidents, as there may be sympathisers who might be inspired

to do the same. Labelling an attack as not terrorism-related can lower the public's threat perceptions and reduce the possibility of reprisals on communities that the attacker is perceived to belong to.

Religiously Motivated Terrorism and its Social Impact

The second attack, believed to be religiously motivated, was targeted at a bishop belonging to a minority Christian community of Assyrian background. Details of the attacker are still emerging, but media reports suggest that he had targeted the firebrand bishop for blaspheming the Islamic prophet. If true, this attack would be part of a wider trend of violence by extremists targeting those critical of their faith.

The youthfulness of the attacker points to another worrying trend observed in recent years, both in Islamist extremism and the extreme right-wing that exist in mostly Western societies, as more and more young individuals get influenced and radicalised by extremist online materials.

A particularly concerning aspect of the second stabbing incident was [how it reignited tensions](#) between Assyrian Muslims and Christians in the neighbourhood. Mosques in Sydney also received [fire-bomb threats](#) in the aftermath of the incident. The escalations on more than one level showed how even low-tech attacks by lone actors can worsen communal tensions and adversely affect social cohesion. These might have more damaging and longer-lasting effects than the terrorist attack itself.

In the church incident, the attacker's religious motivation had, at least from the initial reporting, been due to him taking offence at the bishop's anti-Islamic views. Likewise, extreme right-wing terrorists have also targeted Muslims in Islamophobic attacks in the past. The stabbings during the live-streamed religious sermon evoked memories of the horrific shootings at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019, that killed 51 people. These shootings targeting Muslim worshippers were carried out by Australian far-right terrorist, Brenton Tarrant, who livestreamed his attack on Facebook.

Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether the two stabbing incidents in Sydney would spark more such attacks in Australia to advance other aims, including terrorist ones. Since the incidents, there has been an increase in the use of online spaces by extremist entities and individuals to propagate narratives related to the incidents.

In these online spaces, [misinformation about the attacks](#) that could feed more extremist sentiments and drive further violence was perpetuated. The rioting following the church stabbings is also partly attributable to videos, which conveyed unverified narratives, that went viral.

The attacks also speak to the potency of stabbings as a terrorist tactic elsewhere. For instance, in 2020, one radicalisation case [influenced by the Christchurch shootings](#) was uncovered in Singapore that involved a teenager plotting to carry out stabbing attacks at places of worship. Continued vigilance, especially at the community level, is needed to thwart such attacks.

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