National Security Journal

http://nationalsecurityjournal.nz

Published by:
Centre for Defence
and Security Studies,
Massey University

ISSN: 2703-1926 (print) *ISSN: 2703-1934 (online)*

The Violent Extremism Ideological Framework Explained

Author/s: Combined Threat Assessment Group (CTAG)

To cite this article: Combined Threat Assessment Group. The Violent Extremism Ideological Framework Explained. *National Security Journal*. Published 03 July 2022.
doi: 10.36878/nsj20220703.03

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.36878/nsj20220703.03

View CrossRef data: https://search.crossref.org/?q=10.36878%2Fnsj20220703.03

Journal Article published 03 July 2022 in National Security Journal.

THE VIOLENT EXTREMISM IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK EXPLAINED

Combined Threat Assessment Group [1]

Following the lead of Canadian counterparts and working with representatives from a number of agencies involved in Aotearoa New Zealand's counter-terrorism efforts, the Combined Threat Assessment Group (CTAG) led the development of a uniquely New Zealand framework intended to be a specific, objective and accurate representation of the threat from all forms of violent extremism relevant to New Zealand. This was a deliberate effort to seek a set of accurate terms that avoided unduly securitising legitimate, non-violent political, ethnic and religious communities and beliefs, while simultaneously not adding unwarranted legitimacy to violent extremist ideologies. This article outlines and explains the Violent Extremism Ideological Framework increasingly in use across security sector agencies - and is written by those whose created it.

Foreword

Language is important. The words that we use do more than communicate; they implicitly set out our values and frame how we think about issues. This is true in the terrorist and violent extremist language space, and how we describe those who would do us harm.

The Combined Threat Assessment Group has undertaken an extensive review of our language relating to violent extremist and terrorist ideologies, on behalf of Aotearoa New Zealand's counter-terrorism agencies.

1 The Combined Threat Assessment Group is a combined agency unit within the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service. The identities of the authors are therefore unable to be published. The Foreword has been penned by Andy George, Counter-Terrorism Strategic Coordinator, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The updated language, which has been used by many government agencies for the past year, seeks to describe the broad ideology types that violent extremists subscribe to, without linking them to any particular national or ethnic background, religion, or legitimate political behaviour. In doing so, we are mindful of the unfair burden placed on peaceful people that was inherent in earlier language.

The new terms improve the way in which we talk about violent extremism. We acknowledge they will not be universally agreeable and will require regular consideration and updating as our thinking – and the violent extremism landscape – evolves.

Violent extremist and terrorist ideologies are complicated, with significant overlaps across them. The terms used are therefore broad, and intended for use in describing the wide landscape, rather than being specific enough to describe an ideology relating to a particular individual or attack.

Finally, we hope by circulating these terms more widely, people will understand what we mean when we use them, bringing us closer to a common understanding of the problems that face us; and, in turn, making us more able to have conversations about solutions. My thanks to the Combined Threat Assessment Group for their work in developing these terms.

Introduction

Violent extremist ideologies have generally existed on a spectrum, but this traditional approach is being increasingly challenged by more dynamic, complex and sometimes less coherent ideologies.[1] Inconsistent use of language associated with such ideologies can create confusion, and inadvertently undermine common understandings among government, security agencies, the media and academia, as well as communities and the general public. Improved common understanding, through consistency of such language, can better describe extremist positions and therefore improve national security outcomes by correctly and precisely isolating behavior of concern.[2]

In March 2021, during her opening statement to Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee, Director-General of Security Rebecca Kitteridge advised of agency moves to adopt new terminology for clarifying forms of violent extremism and terrorist threats from varying ideologies, without conflating these with communities.[3] In June 2021, Kitteridge further noted it was inaccurate and counterproductive to stereotype communities as terrorist or violent extremist threats, and as such the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) had committed to changing their use of violent extremism terminology to avoid such stereotyping.[4] In November 2021, the Honourable Andrew Little, Minister responsible for the NZSIS and the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), and Lead Coordination Minister for the

Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on the Christchurch Mosques, made further pronouncements on the importance of language[5].

Ensuring the language is accurate and sensitive can be difficult and there is not necessarily a "right" answer. Following the lead of Canadian counterparts and working with representatives from a number agencies involved in Aotearoa New Zealand's counter-terrorism efforts, the Combined Threat Assessment Group (CTAG) led the development of a uniquely New Zealand framework intended to be a specific, objective and accurate representation of the threat from all forms of violent extremism relevant to New Zealand.[6] The developers sought to avoid terms that unduly securitised legitimate, non-violent political, ethnic and religious communities and beliefs, while simultaneously not adding unwarranted legitimacy to violent extremist ideologies. The developers consulted widely across a range of government agencies working on various aspects of this issue, as well as with international partner agencies, many of whom have done extensive work to update their own frameworks.

The resulting ideological framework, explained in this article, was endorsed by New Zealand's Counter Terrorism Coordination Committee in November 2020, and adopted by CTAG, NZSIS and a growing number of government agencies. The common terminology also supports agencies to address the findings of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain on 15 March 2019 in relation to building a shared understanding of strategic intelligence assessments and awareness of emerging threats.

This article seeks to provide the public, media, academia, and policy and intelligence professionals with an explanation of the current ideological framework, the principles and purpose behind it, as well as its limitations and challenges. These are complex issues to categorise and, like all terminology frameworks, will not suit every circumstance and risks making generalisations. However, in understanding the language we use, and why, readers may be encouraged to consider and promote future improvements.

This article follows CTAG's "Assessing Terrorism Threats to New Zealand: The role of the Combined Threat Assessment Group" published in the *National Security Journal* in November 2020.[7]

Related Definitions

The role of CTAG is to assess the threat of terrorism (including violent extremism ahead of any terrorist acts), violent protest and violent crime against New Zealand interests both domestically and internationally. The framework developed focuses specifically on terrorism and violent extremism, as defined in New Zealand's National Strategy for Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism:

> A terrorist act, under New Zealand law, is "an ideologically, politically, or religiously motivated act – including, but not limited to, those causing death or serious bodily injury – intended to intimidate a population, or to compel the government to do or not do certain things".[8]
>
> Violent extremism is defined in New Zealand's Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism Strategy as, "the justification of violence with the aim of radically changing the nature of government, religion or society. This violence is often targeted against groups seen as threatening violent extremists' success or survival, or undermining their world view".[9]

Importantly, the ideological framework discussed here relates to forms of violent extremism, which justify and encourage acts of terrorism. It is not uncommon for these ideologies to be a violent fringe of existing extremist non-violent beliefs.

Ideological Framework

Failing to use a common framework opens up the risk of terminology inconsistencies, which in turn can lead to real or perceived misalignment and confusion. However, the use of a terminology framework does not come without its challenges and limitations. There is no "right" answer to the terminology that should be used, and any terminology in use should be subject to scrutiny and may well need to adapt over time.

The current framework breaks down violent extremism into four broad ideological motivations. These motivations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and for any individual or group they can be a combination of two or more. Figure 1 depicts the four high level types of motivation and how they can overlap. Descriptions for each are provided in the following section.

The framework is intended to provide a means for objective and accurate representation of the primary drivers behind identified forms of violent extremism.

Intelligence assessments must remain accurate, while also ideally seeking to use sensitive language wherever possible. The framework is therefore guided by the principles of accuracy and sensitivity. Accuracy means all efforts will be made to ensure assessments and other commentary is not wrong or misleading. Sensitivity means all efforts will be made to use the most viable tactful way of accurately describing an ideology. Should the requirements of accuracy and sensitivity be found to be incompatible, accuracy must prevail in intelligence assessments.

The shift to umbrella terms for these ideological motivations has been described as positive with regard to national security discourse, with a "destigmatising of minority groups" and allowing for legitimate conversations that won't "descend into vilification".[10]

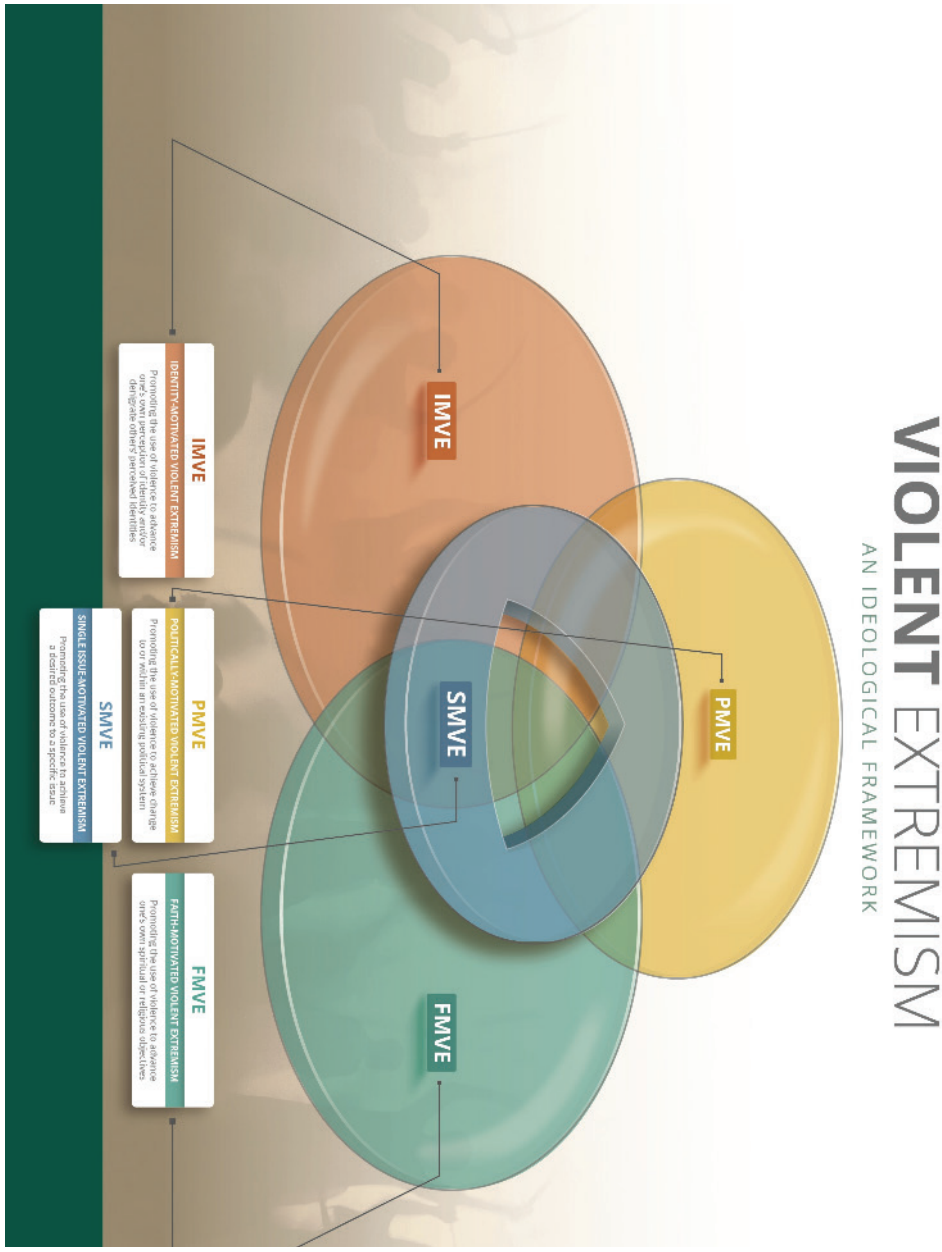

Figure 1: Violent Extremism Ideological Framework

Top-Level: Overarching ideological motivations

The purpose of the overarching ideological motivations is to provide general guidance as to where a group or individual is ideologically aligned. This helps to build an accurate yet flexible overall picture of a given threat environment, or of an individual or group if there is limited information. The definitions and explanations discussed below aim to avoid securitisation and stigmatisation of otherwise legitimate forms of identity, politics and faith.

Identity-Motivated Violent Extremism (IMVE)

IMVE is defined as promoting the use of violence to advance one's own perception of identity and/or denigrate others' perceived identities. IMVE includes, but is not limited to, threat actors operating on the basis of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality and political affiliation. IMVE captures part of what was previously labelled in CTAG reporting as "right wing extremism", specifically advocating for violence based on ethnicity, gender or sexuality without any explicit "right wing" political agenda. IMVE can include religious sectarianism where violent extremism is focused on the hatred of another religion for its existence or perceived inferiority. IMVE tends to occur between groups within society, although hostility may not be reciprocal.

Politically-Motivated Violent Extremism (PMVE)

PMVE is defined as promoting the use of violence to achieve change to, or within, an existing political system. PMVE incorporates what was formerly labelled "right wing" and "left wing" violent extremism that includes an overt political component (such as fascism and anarchism, as well as revolutionary Marxism). Adherents of these forms of violent extremism would seek to alter New Zealand's liberal democracy through force. PMVE tends to focus against Government figures and representatives of the state, including law enforcement.

Faith-Motivated Violent Extremism (FMVE)

FMVE is defined as promoting the use of violence to advance one's own spiritual or religious objectives. FMVE is not limited to violent extremist off-shoots of recognised religions, but can result from highly personalised belief systems. Importantly, FMVE adherents consider violence to be justified or even required in fulfilment of their particular 'faith'. The term 'faith' is used rather than 'religion' to recognise the fact that violent extremist ideologies reflect an individual interpretation of a spiritual belief or religion ('faith') and not the belief or religion with which they may claim affiliation (for example, distinguishing doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo from its claim to established religious foundations). FMVE adherents tend to view their violence as righteous acts in a conflict between 'good' and irredeemable 'evil'.

Single Issue-Motivated Violent Extremism (SMVE)

SMVE is defined as promoting the use of violence to achieve a desired outcome to a specific issue. This motivation seeks policy change or advancement of a particular issue within a current political or social system. SMVE beliefs are typically based on one of the other three ideologies in the framework but can be distinguished by the fact the resolution of the single-issue would be expected to end the threat of violence. SMVE aims to include individuals or groups advocating for, or using, extremist violence in an effort to change government policy or alter societal attitudes regarding issues such as abortion, use of pesticides (such as 1080), or animal testing by pharmaceutical companies.

Mid-level: ideologies and movements

The overarching ideological motivations detailed above are useful for describing the broad categories of violent extremist ideologies. However, it is also important to be able to describe the more specific ideologies that sit within these broad categories whenever feasible or appropriate.

In threat assessment it is important to understand and communicate how the threat from a specific violent extremist might manifest, and against whom. For example, as noted earlier, PMVE adherents will typically target institutions of the state. However, different forms of PMVE will prioritise these institutions differently, or even avoid or exempt certain targets in keeping with their ideology or strategy. As highlighted in recently released CTAG assessments, the current PMVE threat is primarily directed against COVID-19 mitigation programmes and those deemed responsible for them. In time, this will likely evolve and change.

Sub-categories within the overarching ideological motivations provide more specific description and enable increased accuracy and understanding of New Zealand's threat environment, and the groups or individuals within it. This greater understanding of the threat actors' beliefs, grievances and the possible targets of their hostility enables clearer advice to risk managers and informs better decision making. However, there are often challenges in balancing the guiding principles of accuracy with sensitivity.

To aid risk management decisions, it is important to distinguish between the White identity sub-category of IMVE and a range of other IMVE sub-categories, such as misogynistic 'involuntary celibates' (Incel) inspired IMVE or violent extremist adherents of Hindutva IMVE. The latter ideologies are currently less prominent in New Zealand, and could manifest differently in terms of the intended targets of their violence; but the improved accuracy from sub-categories can risk insensitivity.

The New Zealand threat environment has included small numbers of individuals supportive of Al-Qa'ida and/or the so called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

However, some individuals may not (or no longer) be aligned to these groups but still adhere to the groups' underlying 'Salafi-Jihadism' beliefs. This is a widely recognised term to describe an extreme fringe of the otherwise non-violent Salafi movement within Islam.[11] However, the term 'Salafi-Jihadism' may rightly be considered insensitive because the wider and more populous forms of Salafism are non-violent, and 'jihadism' (as reference to a form of violent extremism) promotes an inaccurate understanding of 'jihad' as a core tenet of Islam. The pursuit of accuracy draws analysts towards 'Salafi-Jihadism', while a commitment to sensitivity encourages us to find a better term. Meanwhile, intelligence assessment must be timely, or risk failing to draw attention to critical threats.

On balance, when faced with the choice between pursuing more sensitive terminology or the production of accurate and timely assessment, we must go with the latter. However, this calculus is not an excuse for complacency in the interim.

Base-level: Affiliation with individuals and groups

As highlighted in the example above, reference to an individual's base-level ideology (by group affiliation) provides the most accurate description, while in turn also maximising sensitivity. This is because the ideology can be attributed to an identified violent extremist group rather than by reference to the violent extremist fringe of non-violent movements. Accordingly, describing an individual or group as specifically 'ISIL-inspired' provides decision makers with highly specific information on the ideological drivers behind a particular threat. Being able to describe them as 'ISIL-inspired', rather than 'Salafi-Jihadist' or 'Islamist Extremist', is also more appropriate and sensitive. Similar levels of accuracy and sensitivity can be achieved by expressing an individual's level of affiliation with recognised violent extremist groups, particularly designated terrorist entities, ranging in ideology from Al-Qa'ida to *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) of Peru.

Relatedly, CTAG defines the degrees of threat actor involvement or affiliation as 'inspired', 'enabled' or 'directed'. 'Inspired' involves a threat actor who has been motivated to act by violent extremist rhetoric, individuals, groups and/or other attacks, but has no other apparent direction or support from violent extremist individuals, groups or organisations. 'Enabled' describes a threat actor, in pursuit of a self-determined goal, who has personally received instructional, material, logistical or ideological support from a violent extremist group or individual. Finally, 'directed' relates to a threat actor who is acting on the orders of a violent extremist individual, group or organisation, which has provided oversight and direct material support to the operation.

Putting the framework into practice

As highlighted in the introduction, no terminology framework will be perfect. The current framework requires continued explanation and education to ensure consistency of understanding and application across government, as well as among academics, media and community groups. Adopting new terminology is inherently difficult, and many will prefer the comfort of familiar language.

The framework adopts terminology used in the National Strategy for Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism and the framework must remain consistent with government strategy. This limits the scope of possible change to the current framework. Conversely, the framework may need to be updated to reflect changes in the strategy.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of the current framework will be the need for an ongoing development of the mid-level sub-categories. While the example of 'Salafi-Jihadism' has been discussed, this may well be joined by potential discomfort with current terms like 'White' or 'Hindutva' IMVE. The currently high fluidity, and regular overlap, of violent extremist ideologies means new sub-categories are likely to come and go quickly. However, the framework has proven suitably flexible (to date at least).

The framework's move away from some established terms has proven useful through recent developments in the national threat environment. The widely used term 'right wing extremism' often conflates aspects of IMVE and PMVE. Certainly, there often is overlap. However, we also need to be able to differentiate between racist 'right wing' IMVE, founded in white supremacy beliefs, and the extreme libertarianism seen in 'right wing' PMVE, without white supremacist features. The framework has allowed CTAG to more accurately describe evolving trends and the complexities of an increasingly diverse and congested threat environment, in which both ideologies are present among others. The deconstruction of 'right wing extremism', should be joined by a similar approach to 'left wing extremism', which has also been a diverse ideological 'bucket'.

As a trans-national challenge, countering violent extremism and terrorism benefits from common international understandings. Alignment with international terminology frameworks is difficult, even among English-speaking partners who share the sentiment for needing more accurate and sensitive terminology.

In 2020, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) adopted a framework with three overarching motivations: ideologically motivated violent extremism (including xenophobic, anti-authority, gender-driver and other motivated violence), religiously motivated violent extremism, and politically motivated violent extremism.[12] This formed the basis for our current terminology.

In March 2021, the Australia Security Intelligence Organisation's (ASIO) Director General recognised that names and labels can be powerful in determining how an issue is framed and considered. ASIO also acknowledged their language needed to evolve to match the threat environment. Instead of Islamist, left- and right-wing violent extremism, ASIO now use two categories when referring to violent threats – ideologically motivated violent extremism and religiously motivated violent extremism.[13]

While similar, a key difference between our framework and those of ASIO and CSIS is their use of 'ideologically motivated violent extremism' as a specific category, not to be confused with identity motivated violent extremism (IMVE) in the New Zealand framework. CTAG considered 'ideologically motivated' as a category lacked sufficient specificity, and arguably encompasses all violent extremist belief systems. Hence, our terminology is an 'ideological framework', with 'overarching ideological motivations' enveloping all forms of violent extremism: PMVE, IMVE, FMVE and SMVE.

For the reasons outlined above, the current framework has preferred the individualised concept of 'faith' in FMVE over 'religiously motivated violent extremism'.

In July 2021, the MI5 Director General referred to Extreme Right Wing and Islamist Extremist terrorism as the United Kingdom's greatest terrorism threats. The UK terrorism threat level is derived from assessing these two main categories, plus 'Left, Anarchist and Single Issue Terrorism' (LASIT) and 'Northern Ireland-related Terrorism'.[14] In July 2020, UK police were reportedly considering alternative terms for 'Islamist Extremism' following a request from a Muslim police organisation which claimed the use of such terminology was resulting in negative stereotypes and perceptions, including discrimination and Islamophobia.[15]

Conclusion

Common language is essential for shared understanding. Language which inhibits accuracy or stereotypes whole communities is not fit for purpose. At the same time, it is not realistic to expect the common language offered by an ideological framework will be infallible. The current framework is a significant departure from traditional terminology; deconstructing established terms and introducing new concepts. In doing so, it has allowed greater flexibility but also raised new analytical challenges in pursuing accuracy with sensitivity.

This article has sought to explain the terminology framework adopted by CTAG, NZSIS and a number of partner agencies to describe New Zealand's violent extremism environment, with a view to improving shared understandings of the terrorist threats we face.

1 1 May 2021, Lydia Khalil, *Extremism and clear terminology*, Lowy Institute, www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/extremism-and-clear-terminology; 13 November 2021, CSIS says it's increasingly worried about violent online rhetoric, CTV News, www.ctvnews.ca/politics/csis-says-it-s-increasingly-worried-about-violent-online-rhetoric/1.5664931

2 Vandenberg, H. & Hoverd, W. (2020). The inconsistent usage of the terms "extremism" and "terrorism" around the Christchurch mosque attacks, *National Security Journal*, 2 (1), doi:10.36878/nsj20200201.03

3 24 March 2021, Director General of Security Rebecca Kitteridge, NZSIS Director-General opening statement to Intelligence and Security Committee, https://www.nzsis.govt.nz/news/nzsis-director-general-opening-statement-to-intelligence-and-security-committee/

4 15 June 2021, Director General of Security Rebecca Kitteridge, *Terrorism challenges: the dynamic nature of the terrorism and violent extremism risk*, www.nzsis.govt.nz/news/terrorism-challenges-the-dynamic-nature-of-the-terrorism-and-violent-extremism-risk

5 4 November 2021, Intelligence and security in our changing world – speech to the Victoria University of Wellington Centre for Strategic Studies, Hon. Andrew Little, www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/intelligence-and-security-our-changing-world-speech-victoria-university-wellington-centre

6 Refer redacted version of 20-231-TI released by the DG of Security

7 November 2020, Combined Assessment Threat Group, Assessing terrorism threats to New Zealand: The role of the Combined Threat Assessment Group, *National Security Journal*, doi: 10.36878/nsj20200202.08

8 5 October 2021, Section 5 Terrorism Suppression Act 2002, www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2002/0034/latest/DLM152702.html;

June 2021, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *New Zealand's Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism Strategy*, www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-10/New%20Zealands%20Countering%20Terrorism%20and%20Violent%20Extremism%20Strategy.pdf

9 June 2021, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *New Zealand's Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism Strategy*, www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-10/New%20Zealands%20Countering%20Terrorism%20and%20Violent%20Extremism%20Strategy.pdf

10 28 March 2021, E-International Relations, Opinion – Assessing changes in how Australia refers to extremism, Benjamin Cherry-Smith, www.e-ir.info/2021/03/28/opinion-assessing-changes-in-how-australia-refers-to-extremism/

11 Moghadam, A. (2008). The Salafi-Jihad as a religious ideology, Combating Terrorism Center, Volume 1, Issue 3.

12 20 May 2020, CSIS, Threats to the security of Canada and Canadian interests, www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/publications/2019-public-report/threats-to-the-security-of-canada-and-canadian-interests.html

13 17 March 2021, ASIO, *Director-General's Annual Threat Assessment*, www.asio.gov.au/publications/speeches-and-statements/director-generals-annual-threat-assessment-2021.html

14 14 July 2021, MI5, Director General Ken McCallum gives annual threat update 2021, www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-ken-mccallum-gives-annual-threat-update-2021;

July 2019, MI5, Threat Levels – Threat Level History, www.mi5.gov.uk/threat-levels

15 20 July 2020, Police may drop 'Islamist' term when describing terror attacks, *The Times*, www.thetimes.co.uk/article/police-may-drop-term-islamist-when-describing-terror-attacks-7pjsf8pn7