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THE INCONSISTENT USAGE OF THE TERMS “EXTREMISM” AND “TERRORISM” AROUND THE CHRISTCHURCH MOSQUE ATTACKS

Holly Vandenberg and William Hoverd¹

This research note briefly explores both the pre-attack and post-attack language employed by New Zealand’s security agencies and the New Zealand Prime Minister, specifically with regards to the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism.’ It demonstrates that throughout 2019, national security references to the Christchurch attacker were inconsistent in their use of the terms ‘extremist’ and ‘terrorist.’ We argue that this inconsistency indicates confusion and directly influences government and security agencies, as well as, the media and general population. Consequently, it is imperative for the terms to be clearly defined so that the executive and national security sector can deliver concise, clear, factual and consistent language and information for any future extremist or terrorist concerns facing New Zealand. Moreover, at this stage, we see no evidence that the new 2020 DPMC definitions of these two terms have encouraged consistent and concise language around these terms across the sector. We stress that an improvement in this language consistency will, ultimately, achieve better national security outcomes and lead to a safer New Zealand.

Keywords: Christchurch Terror Attack, National Security, Extremism, Terrorism, New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, Counter Terrorism, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, New Zealand Police and the Government Communication Security Bureau.

Introduction

On 15 March 2019 during Friday Prayer, the Christchurch Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Avenue Islamic Centre were attacked by a gunman, resulting in the death of 51 people and injuries to 49 others. In 2019, national and international government agencies, heads of state, academics, and media, all used different language to describe these events and the attacker. Since the event, inconsistent terminology has been used by

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experts to describe the attack and attacker. For example, the individual who committed the attack has since been described as a lone-wolf, lone-attacker, extremist, far-right extremist, right-wing nationalist, right-wing terrorist, white supremacist, racist, eco-fascist, member of the alt-right, alleged terrorist, and terrorist.¹ Our analysis of this 2019 language, focused on the different descriptors ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’, and finds these terms were used inconsistently. This uncritical and potentially synonymous use of these two terms portray these as similar and overlapping, but ultimately they are, and must be, separate concepts.

Notably, in our discussion of the definitions and official usage of the terms, we explore both the pre-attack and post-attack language employed by New Zealand’s security agencies and the Prime Minister. We show that over this period any reference to the Christchurch attacker inconsistently applied the terms ‘extremist’ and ‘terrorist.’ We also demonstrate that this language disconnect occurred throughout 2019, both prior to the 15 March attack as well as after the attack. Lastly, we contextualise this 2019 finding through a discussion of the newly minted, but under-publicised, definitions of the two terms as they are outlined in the 2020 Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet’s (DPMC) ‘Countering terrorism and violent extremism national strategy.’²

We argue that the 2020 DPMC definition of the terms ‘extremism,’ ‘violent extremism,’ and ‘terrorism’ are a positive start to addressing the inconsistency of language. But there are still inconsistency and interpretation challenges around the ways in which the terms are applied, not least that they can be used as synonyms for each other. In our conclusion, we stress that an improvement in language consistency can achieve a clearer cross-sectorial vision of these problems that would, ultimately, better achieve national security outcomes and lead to a safer New Zealand.

Methodology

Data on the language usage of ‘terrorism’ and ‘extremism’ as assessed by this research note was drawn from websites, documents and speeches relating to terrorism as disseminated by the following national security agencies: DPMC, the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS), the Government Communication Security Bureau (GCSB), the Combined Threat Assessment Group (CTAG) and NZ Police. Data was also obtained from speeches by the Prime Minister Jacinda Arden and Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters. Supporting data is also drawn from certain New Zealand Defence Force sources (NZDF). Using 15 March 2019 as a fulcrum point for comparison, it assessed 2018 and pre-15 March 2019, ‘terrorism’ and ‘extremism’ usage with post-15 March 2019 discussion of the topics by these agencies. Finally, the analysis of this language, is brought into dialogue with the 2020 DPMC’s ‘Countering terrorism and violent extremism national strategy’. In our Findings & Discussion section, we outline five findings:

1. There has been inconsistent usage of the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’.
2. Usage of the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ evolved in 2019.
3. There remains a need to consistently define the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’.
4. Consistency of definitions will enhance national security.
5. The 2020 DPMC’s ‘Countering terrorism and violent extremism national strategy’ is a positive start, but it has not disseminated the definitional distinction between ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’.

Definitions and Official Usage of the Terms ‘Extremism’ and ‘Terrorism’

This section begins by assessing how ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ have been defined globally and locally. It then turns to assess how the Prime Minister, NZ Police, NZSIS and GCSB used the two terms prior to and after the 15 March 2019 attack. It shows that the terms were inconsistently defined and spoken across New Zealand’s key agencies. The lack of consistent working definitions for both ‘extremism’³ and ‘terrorism’⁴ in New Zealand⁵ and globally, goes some way to contribute to the lack of consistency in their use. Moreover, it has been noted that globally, the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ have often been conflated by policy makers.⁶ Neither of the terms have agreed upon global legal definitions, both terms have some associated implicit, institutional, and/or systemic bias within them, and both terms are often used interchangeably with other associated terms. Lastly, this section assesses how the 2020 DPMC ‘Countering terrorism and violent extremism national strategy’⁷ has attempted to rectify these 2019 definitional challenges around these two terms. We turn now to investigate each term individually.

‘Extremism’ is the term we expect to find national security policy and spokespeople to be less familiar with and therefore we expect they will be less consistent in its usage. An early and comprehensive discussion of the global literature’s lack of definition and motivating factors for ‘extremism’ was compiled by Imran Awan.⁸ Awan noted that there are several interpretations of ‘extremism’, and what might lead to ‘extremist’ behavior, and these have resulted in confusion, mis-use of the term, and problematic bias.⁹ In New Zealand, Senior Psychologist for the Department of Corrections, Jayde Walker, describes ‘extremism’ as “any (generally political or religious) theory that holds to uncompromising and rigid policies or ideology.”¹⁰ In addition, both Awan and Walker note there are problems with the term being used interchangeably with terms such as terrorism, radicalisation, violent extremism, and fundamentalism. In 2017, Bötticher defined ‘extremism’ as an “an ideological position embraced by those anti-establishment movements, which understand politics as struggle for supremacy rather than as peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for advancing the common good.”¹¹ Bötticher’s work goes on to define where ‘extremism’ might exist within a society, how ‘extremism’ breeds, and how ‘extremism’ can lead

to power and the corresponding consequences of extremists in power. Interestingly, in our 2019 analysis, neither the United States Department of Defense (DoD), nor the NZ Police, NZSIS, GCSB or DPMC, provided any definitions for ‘extremism,’ instead only officially using the term in relation to terrorism and counterterrorism.

‘Terrorism’ is equally as difficult to define, however, unlike ‘extremism,’ ‘terrorism’ does have more widely accepted definitions and characteristics.¹² Importantly, the United States DoD as well as the New Zealand Government and security agencies go some way to defining the term. The United States DoD *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* defines ‘terrorism’ as “the unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political.”¹³ The NZ Police,¹⁴ while the lead agency for responding to a terrorist event if it occurs, do not provide any definition for the term, it does link to the *Terrorism Suppression Act 2002* (TSA) which defines ‘terrorism’ as an act “carried out for the purpose of advancing an ideological, political, or religious cause”¹⁵ and with the intention to either “induce terror in a civilian population”¹⁶ or “unduly compel or to force a government or an international organisation to do or abstain from doing any act.”¹⁷ The Act also sets out specific outcomes tied to ‘terrorism,’ such as destruction, interference, or death, that further enhances the definition. The Act does note that ‘terrorism’ can be motivated by ‘extremism.’¹⁸ Although the TSA defines ‘terrorism,’ in 2019, there was no working definition for ‘extremism.’ We also found that in 2019, certain New Zealand Government and security agencies provided their own loose definitions for terrorism, rather than quoting the one provided by the TSA. For example, the NZSIS defines localised (domestic) terrorism as:

...individuals and groups in New Zealand that are committed to acts of terrorism, violence and intimidation. These are extremists who advocate using violence to impose their own political, ethnic or religious viewpoint on others.¹⁹

Importantly, this statement makes a distinction between ‘terrorism’ as an act and ‘extremism’ as a viewpoint that *might* motivate violence. However, because there is no consistent definition, we see that the NZSIS potentially extends what it refers to as “extremism” broadly to include many viewpoints. This broad term repeats the haziness inherent in DPMC’s current definition of national security²⁰ which is necessarily wide to include a variety of unknowns but is too broad for operational purposes. In the NZSIS use of the word ‘extremism’ it offers a broad possible variety of ideologies but not necessarily any indication of how holding ‘extremist views’ link to ‘terrorism’ *per se*. It is likely the link is being stressed to suggest that those ‘extremists’ determined to hold violent views (with questions around intent), require assessment and possibly surveillance.

Unfortunately, the GCSB, DPMC, nor CTAG²¹ which was established specifically to assess terrorism threats within and external to New Zealand, do not provide any definitions for ‘terrorism’ or ‘extremism’. We argue that the problem of inconsistent definitions, as well as the evidence that the terms extremism and terrorism are being used, at times interchangeably, has led to a disconnect in the 2019 language used in relation to extremism and terrorism by the New Zealand Government and security agencies, prior to, and post, the 15 March attack.

We now explore how the Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has used the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism.’ Prior to the Christchurch attack, in a 2018 joint statement with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Ardern noted that the two countries needed to work together to “combat terrorism and counter violent extremism.”²² This is one of the earliest statements by Ardern that signals counter-terrorism directives would be broadly expanded to include ‘extremism.’ This directive was also confirmed in the Ministry of Defence ‘Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018.’²³

We now turn to review briefly how Ardern has used the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ post 15 March 2019. In a House statement four days after the attack, Ardern refers to the alleged attacker as a “terrorist...[and]...extremist.”²⁴ Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters speaking on the same day also used both the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ in relation to the attack.²⁵ Two months later, in Ardern’s opening statement at the Christchurch Call in France, Ardern again referenced ‘terrorism’ and ‘extremist’ violence in relation to the 15 March attacker.²⁶ And yet, in Ardern’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2019, Ardern referenced the 15 March attack as ‘terrorism’ exclusively, and omitted the term ‘extremism.’²⁷ This omission was despite the goal of the Christchurch Call, specifically initiated by Ardern, being to “eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content.”²⁸ Critically, we see that the Prime Minister has tended, when speaking to the New Zealand public, to link the two terms together without necessarily clarifying a definition of either term, and also using both terms interchangeably.

We now repeat the before and after analysis with regards to NZ Police. In 2016, the NZ Police released an advisory document in reference to the TSA.²⁹ This advisory document contained no reference to ‘extremism.’ In a NZ Police update almost a month after the Christchurch attack, the only mention of ‘extremism’ was in reference to it being 1 of 19 indicators of terrorist activity.³⁰ The counter-terrorism page for the NZ Police, as of May 2020, still makes no reference to ‘extremism.’³¹ The Commissioner of Police, Mike Bush (retired April 2020), did not once refer to ‘extremism,’ either in reference to ‘terrorism,’ the 15 March attack, or otherwise.

Turning to our intelligence agencies, Rebecca Kitteridge, Director General of the NZSIS, has consistently referred to ‘extremism’ in relation to ‘terrorism,’ both pre and post the 15 March attack. In February 2019, following on from Ardern’s 2018 statement obliquely

signaling an additional focus on extremism, Kitteridge spoke about self-radicalisation and mobilisation of ‘extremist ideologies’ as being of concern in relation to terrorism.³² The February 2019 speech by Kitteridge also made mention of specific “right wing extremism”, advising that while it was a concerning issue, it was a slow moving one.³³ On 18 March 2019, Kitteridge defined the 15 March attack as both ‘terrorism and violent extremism.’³⁴ Subsequently, Kitteridge again consistently used both terms in the same way in a statement on 18 September 2019, also taking that opportunity to advise the public that violent extremism, and specifically right-wing violent extremism, had been a facet of their counter-terrorism operations for the previous nine months.³⁵

The GCSB does not provide many statements about their operations and as such, they made no mention of ‘extremism’ prior to the 15 March attack, and very little in reference to ‘terrorism.’ However, post the 15 March attack, GCSB Director Andrew Hampton did release a statement to acknowledge the “terrorist attacks” which contained no mention of ‘extremism.’³⁶ Following on from this statement, the GCSB released a fact sheet relating to their role in counter-terrorism, which included the statement: “...warrants that allow GCSB to gather intelligence about terrorism that do not differentiate between different forms of violent extremism.”³⁷ Again we see, that when mention is made about ‘extremism’ after the attack, it is in the very broadest manner. We also see hints that there was a possible distinction being made between ‘extremism’ and ‘violent extremism.’

Importantly, in February 2020 DPMC released the ‘Countering terrorism and violent extremism national strategy,’ which is the subject of discussion elsewhere in this volume by Battersby, Ball and Nelson.³⁸ This strategy document sets out a work programme and the various responsibilities for counter-terrorism operations and policy across the national security sector. For our purposes, this document is important because in a small buried footnote it provides a working definition of ‘extremism,’ ‘violent extremism’ and ‘terrorism.’³⁹ It states:

“Extremism Religious, social or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of more broadly accepted belief systems in large parts of society, and are often seen as objectionable to large parts of society. Extreme ideologies may seek radical changes in the nature of government, religion or society or to create a community based on their ideology.

Violent extremism 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.

Terrorism Under New Zealand law, a terrorist act is defined as an ideologically, politically, or religiously motivated act – including those causing death or serious bodily injury – intended to induce terror in the population, or to compel the government to do or not do certain things.”⁴⁰

We must assume that these definitions have emerged as a response to the inconsistent use of these terms prior to 2019. In our analysis, the definition usefully separates ‘extremism’ from ‘violent extremism’. Where ‘extremists’ are seen as objectionable radical ideologists, unlike ‘violent extremists’ they do not threaten violence to achieve their objectives. In this way, ‘extremists’ are free to exercise their democratic freedom to do/think what they wish. The distinction for overt national security sector attention comes when ‘extremists’ begin to seek to justify the use of violence to achieve their aims. They then become ‘violent extremists.’ ‘Terrorism’ is when a violent act motivated by extremist ideology causes death or injury.

We must assume too that these three definitions relate to threat/risk classifications which determine the amount of national security attention each group receives, with ascending amounts of intervention being applied to those deemed ‘violent extremists’ and possible ‘terrorists.’ Overall, we find the general definitions provided by the document to be helpful to addressing the terminological inconsistency we have demonstrated were endemic prior to its release.

Discussion of Findings

After this brief review of how the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ by the New Zealand Government and security agencies, pre and post the 15 March 2019 attack, five findings are evident. In the first four, we specifically focus on the implications of the inconsistent usage of terms, the changing usage of the terms, the need to consistently define the terms across the national security sector and how a consistent definition would likely enhance national security outcomes. In the fifth finding, we explore how and whether the 2020 DPMC’s ‘Countering terrorism and violent extremism national strategy’ has addressed the first four findings related to the prior terminological inconsistencies.

There has been inconsistent usage of the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’: Prior to the 15 March attack, the term ‘extremism’ was barely used, only appearing in the year prior and in reference to right-wing nationalism. Also prior to the 15 March attack, the term ‘terrorism’ was only used in relation to Middle Eastern conflicts, and specifically the actions attributed to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Islamic ideology. Following the attack, ‘extremism,’ and then later ‘violent extremism,’ were used as characteristic descriptors related to ‘terrorism’ by each agency analysed, with the exception of the NZ Police. In addition, the Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern has not been consistent with her usage of the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism,’ in relation to the 15 March attack. We suggest that this inconsistency of usage directly influences not only government and security agencies, but also the media and general population. It is imperative for the terms to be clearly defined, and consistently applied so that the executive can deliver concise, clear, factual and consistent language and

information for any future ‘extremist’ or ‘terrorist’ concerns facing New Zealand. At this stage, we see no evidence that the new DPMC definitions have encouraged security agencies, and the media, to follow suit with consistent and concise usage of this language.

Usage of the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ evolved in 2019: Prior to 2020, the terms ‘extremism,’ ‘violent extremism,’ and ‘terrorism’ were used interchangeably or with imprecise links to each other, but the way they have been employed has evolved. Prior to 2018, there was little mention of ‘extremism’ in the national security vernacular. Between 2018 and 2019, there was some indication, from the Ministry of Defence, Prime Minister, and NZSIS, that ‘extremism’ was becoming a security concern. Despite this indication and usage, no further definitions for ‘extremism’ were provided. Although there was an increased focus on ‘extremist’ ideology, the focus came under the umbrella of ‘terrorism.’ After the 15 March attack, the term ‘extremism,’ and then more specifically ‘violent extremism,’ was increasingly used to explain the motivation for the attack, although it was almost always used in an unexplained connection with the terms ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist.’ As such, it’s not clear whether the terms were (and are still) used as synonyms or whether one (terrorism) refers to the violent act and the other (extremism) to the ideological motivation. Given, that we see little evidence of the new DPMC definitions being used across the national security sector, there remains real risk that the terms are being used synonymously, uncritically or inconsistently by some in government.

There remains a need to consistently define the terms extremism and terrorism: Regardless of whether the term ‘extremism’ relates to an ideological motivator for violence or whether it is simply a synonym post the 15 March attack, it stands to reason that the definitions for both ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ did need to be updated and clarified. Given that the DPMC have now employed two definitions of ‘extremism,’ perhaps the terms should also be defined in the TSA? The definition of a terrorist act, as set out in the TSA, describes the intent and outcome of a terrorist act, and thus could be modified to include specific characteristics that pre-empt terrorist attacks, such as ‘extremism’ leading to ‘violent extremism.’ Having both terms clearly defined in New Zealand law might help to systematically reduce the ambiguity and misuse of the terms. However, in the U.K. such a legal definition provided in an Act was discarded after it was criticised for potentially criminalising legitimate political and religious activity.⁴¹ This shows the problem of using the term ‘extremism’ in the national security vernacular, as holding ideologies is an important and legitimate democratic right. Perhaps, a more palatable alternative would be to have DPMC definitions consistently employed and defined by NZ Police, NZSIS and the GSCB in policy, speeches and websites. This would not only better reflect the events that have occurred in New Zealand, but would also be ground zero for achieving consistent language throughout Government and security agencies.

Consistency of definitions will enhance national security: In 2019, both Ardern and Kitteridge have called on the New Zealand public to be vigilant in the face of

‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ and encouraged the civilian reporting of unusual behavior. However, at that time these senior leaders did not utilise consistent definitions, nor consistent language, and by the end of that year there was significant risk of the terms being interpreted as synonyms, uncritically or inconsistently. Even after the DPMC definition, it remains difficult for the general population to understand the distinctions between the three terms, or how the terms may relate to each other, or the everyday behaviors people are requested to report. As such, the 2019 call to arms for civilian reporting needs to be now supported by clear and concise definitions that are easily accessible and digestible to the public and consistently applied and ratified across policy and in law. More fundamentally, we have to question if the national security sector and executive could not in 2019 (and even now) consistently define, assess and utilise these terms, how can New Zealanders be assured that there were and are efficacious all-of-government intelligence, surveillance, prevention, policy and legislative operational frameworks being employed to counter-terrorism and keep us safe from harm?

DPMC’s 2020 ‘Countering terrorism and violent extremism national strategy’ is a positive start but it has not disseminated the definitional distinction between ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’: We think this document is important, as it offers a basis to resolve the inconsistent terminological problem identified in this article through a common defined vernacular and these definitions need to be better disseminated for broader discussion. However, our final analysis turns to the strategy itself with a critical view to its use of the term ‘extremism.’ Today, the term ‘extremism’ is now officially ensconced within the national security lexicon, where before 2019 it was not. We still believe that the DPMC document and its definition of two ‘extremism’ terms needs additional clarity. The definitions are not prominent in the document, they are contained within a footnote mid-way through it. In the document itself, the terms are always discussed in the following order “Terrorism and extremism,” where ‘extremism’ is secondary. It is not clear why the terms are linked together and why extremism is secondary to terrorism? It is tautological to explain that all terrorists are violent extremists. Moreover, the order assumes all terrorists are extremists, when this is not always the case, i.e., Nelson Mandela accepted he was a terrorist, but not a violent extremist. The same could be said for the Rainbow Warrior bombers. If we reversed the order beginning with violent extremist ideology, we could then offer an identifier of who might be a potential terrorist actor.

Critically, outside of the footnote definition there is no discussion of ‘extremism’ in the document. The document never opens a discussion of the relationship between the two terms and it does not relate a discussion of ‘extremism’ to the strategy’s goals and timelines. It assumes that ‘extremism’ is important and a risk to New Zealand, but it never states explicitly how it is a risk. The broad challenge around why ‘extremism’ is important, needs clarification and an explicit relational link to terrorism, and perhaps even that extends a relationship to the document’s demand for social inclusion and prevention. But ultimately, despite the footnote and its useful definition of the terms,

we feel that in practice the problem of the synonymous, uncritical use or inconsistent use of the terms remains. Unless one is particularly focused on the minute detail, there remains a strong risk that the two terms will continue to be used inconsistently across the national security sector (who have not yet consistently publicly taken up the document), the executive, media and the population. It would be useful for DPMC to open a conversation about what they mean and intend by employing these definitions and stress consistency of usage across the sector.

Conclusion

The primary finding of this research note is that there was inconsistent use of the terms 'extremism' and 'terrorism' in national security discourse prior to and post the 15 March attack. In 2019, the Prime Minister did not use the terms consistently, and neither did the relevant security agencies, with the exception of the NZSIS. Although the term terrorism is defined in the TSA, in 2019 this definition was not reiterated on any of the relevant information sites for the DPMC, NZSIS, GCSB, Christchurch Call, CTAG, or the NZ Police. Prior to 2020, the NZSIS was the most consistent and transparent in relation to the terms it used, however this was a task that should ideally have been led by DPMC and mirrored by NZ Police. Nevertheless, in the post 15 March 2019 attack context, the use of the terms 'extremism' and 'terrorism' has evolved. The use of the term 'extremism' has become canon, but it has confusingly evolved to be either an undefined motivator for terrorism (where the relationship is unclear) or a synonym for terrorism. The implication of this evolution is that there remains a need to better disseminate and clarify the new 2020 DPMC definition for both terms in either policy or law, in a more contemporary and relevant way, so as to ensure consistency of language (and by implication, cohere operational practice and policy) through all aspects of government and security agencies. We stress that continued improvement in language consistency can achieve a clearer vision of these problems that would, ultimately, better enhance national security outcomes and lead to a safer New Zealand.

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