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## INTRODUCTION

# Trans-disciplinary Dialogue on New Zealand's Counter Terrorism Approach: A Call to Action for Researchers

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# INTRODUCTION: TRANSDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE ON NEW ZEALAND'S COUNTER TERRORISM APPROACH: A CALL TO ACTION FOR RESEARCHERS

Richard Jackson and Damien Rogers<sup>1</sup>

In this introduction we set the scene for the eight articles that follow. We begin by evaluating recent academic literature on preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) produced overseas before signalling why this literature matters to New Zealand security professionals today. We then situate this special issue in relation to New Zealand's ongoing counterterrorism efforts. Taking seriously Recommendation 14 of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch terrorist attack on 15 March 2019, which called for the Government to establish a programme to fund independent New Zealand-specific research on the causes of, and measures to prevent, violent extremism and terrorism, we highlight the recent contributions academics have made to improving our understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation from a New Zealand perspective. We close out this introduction by signalling worthwhile academic contributions that remain to be realised.

## **Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism**

The academic literature on PCVE is extensive and expanding at a rapid rate. Nevertheless, it is still possible to provide a broad assessment of the current state of the art in terms of what we have learned from two decades of counterterrorism since 9/11, and what we currently know about the causes of violent extremism (VE) and how to deal with it more effectively. Any assessment of the literature on PCVE must by necessity remain cognisant of the broader political, cultural and historical context that PCVE

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programmes and research takes place in, as factors such as major international events, the practices of allied states and the evolution of language and policies can greatly impact upon both research and policy recommendations.

In particular, the importance of language cannot be overstated, as the terms and broader lexicon employed by security professionals and academics necessarily contain assumptions, theories and perspectives on the world which can profoundly shape the problem definition and, in turn, the subsequent policy and programme responses. While the challenge of political violence is longstanding, the language of VE and PCVE is, in fact, relatively recent. At the beginning of the global war on terrorism (GWOT) in 2001, the focus was widely considered to be the problem of 'terrorism' and 'counter-terrorism'. From around 2010 or so, the language shifted to 'radicalisation' and 'counter-radicalisation', even though the phenomenon under investigation remained the same. Crucially, this terminological adjustment shifted the analytical and policy framework from a broader focus on groups, movements and the political conditions which give rise to campaigns of violence, to a much narrower concern with individuals and the psychological changes they went through in the process of becoming involved in violent groups and activities. In the last few years, the language of VE and PCVE has come to dominate policy, practice and research, a change which has further solidified the analytical and policy focus on individuals and their internal beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the evolving linguistic and conceptual context, it is also important to acknowledge that PCVE language, practice and research takes place in the broader context of the ongoing global war on terrorism, which has been characterised by military invasions and occupations, drone killing programmes, major security initiatives, as well as the intensification of Islamophobia and other human rights abuses, such as the use of torture and extraordinary rendition. In one respect, the PCVE approach represents an attempt to leave behind or transcend these violent practices, but it is arguably still influenced by the language, logic and institutional practices and forms of the GWOT. Some critics have gone so far as to suggest that PCVE approaches represent an extension of force-based approach of the GWOT which has expanded the employment of direct physical violence to psychological or epistemic violence – in the sense that PCVE is an approach which attempts to forcibly change the way individuals think and act. That is, PCVE often involves the attempt to psychologically eliminate an individual's desire and will to fight by reshaping their subjectivity.<sup>2</sup>

An assessment of the academic literature reveals a number of problems and challenges which also need to be acknowledged by policymakers, security professionals and researchers who work in the field. In other words, not only is PCVE a highly complex phenomenon which defies easy categorisation and investigation, but the way in which researchers have previously approached it somewhat complicates the current task of developing more robust models and scientific evidence. These challenges and problems of

the academic literature can be summarised under three main headings: conceptual-theoretical challenges; scientific and evidentiary challenges; and practical outcome-related challenges.

First, there are conceptual changes related to the main concepts employed in the field. Apart from the well-trodden literature highlighting the challenges of defining and therefore empirically identifying and researching terrorism,<sup>3</sup> the term radicalisation has proven to be similarly problematic, particularly in terms of the contemporary assumption that to be radical is to be both anti-social and violent.<sup>4</sup> The Suffragettes, conscientious objectors and environmental protestors are only a small sample of groups and individuals with radical but nonviolent and ultimately pro-social beliefs and actions. A related problem here is, with only a few notable exceptions, researchers have largely failed to distinguish or acknowledge any difference between cognitive radicalisation – the set of radical beliefs which purportedly justify violence – and behavioural radicalisation – the radical actions that individuals take in pursuit of their aims.<sup>5</sup> They failed to note that these two forms of radicalisation are not necessarily connected, and an individual can be cognitively radicalised without engaging in any violent activity or can engage in violent activity without being cognitively radicalised.

The challenge of the latest term, ‘violent extremism’, is similar in that it is subjective, contextual and only makes sense in direct relationship to the determination of what constitutes the ‘moderate’ centre against which some forms of activity and opinion can be judged as extreme.<sup>6</sup> Some might consider environmental activists calling for the radical transformation of capitalist society as extreme, for example, while others might view them as rational altruists trying to save future generations. Similarly, the majority of the world’s Muslims would prefer to live under Sharia law, a preference that most people in Western nations would view as extreme. The term also assumes a direct causal relationship between extremist beliefs or ideology and violence, which, as we have noted in relation to radicalisation, is erroneous: one can commit horrendous violence without any extremist beliefs, such as when members of the armed forces commit atrocities in war, while others can hold genuinely extreme beliefs without ever acting upon them. In any event, it seems obvious that the field of PCVE or counter-radicalisation will continue to struggle to produce robust scientific evidence and findings until it can develop clear, consistent and consensual core concepts.

Second, the scientific and evidentiary challenges of the field revolve first and foremost around the lack of solid or convincing evidence that radical or extreme ideas, beliefs or what is generally referred to as ideology cause violence. As Briggs puts it, ‘there is no empirical evidence of a causal link between extremism and violent extremism.’<sup>7</sup> Kundnani draws a similar conclusion: ‘The radicalisation literature fails to offer a convincing demonstration of a causal relationship between holding an ideology and choosing to use violence.’<sup>8</sup> This failure to establish a causal relationship between beliefs and action is not surprising given that beliefs are highly changeable, intersubjective

and, frequently, contextual: what an individual claims to believe can change depending upon the dynamic reception of new information, internal emotional states, peer pressure, external events, media framing and other factors. In many cases, beliefs are deployed post hoc to justify actions and decisions already taken for other reasons. This dynamic, complex and contingent connection between beliefs and actions also explains why the literature which purports to explain terrorism as being the result of religious ideology remains unconvincing.<sup>9</sup>

Of crucial importance to the PCVE field is the somewhat related challenge that there is a lack of robust scientific evidence that the causes of terrorism or violent extremism can be reduced to individual psychological factors, in the absence of other equally important contextual conditions and factors.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, there is a lack of evidence to support the widely accepted practice of a number of states, including the United Kingdom, United States and now New Zealand, that it is possible to identify a series of indicators of violent extremism – again, in the absence of considering contextual factors, caveats and contingencies. A particular problem with the indicator-based radicalisation approach is that many of the purported signs of radicalisation overlap with the experiences and characteristics of typical youth development processes, such as withdrawing from social activities, questioning one's identity, the search for meaning, questioning authority, and so on.<sup>11</sup>

Taking a different perspective, there are a number of established empirical findings which challenge some of the core assumptions of the PCVE field. These include, among others: the finding that there is a great deal of psychological and sociological diversity among militant individuals, which means that no universal profile of a radicalised individual is possible, as well as agreement that terrorists or violent extremists are, for the most part, psychologically 'normal'; the finding that the process by which individuals come to be involved in violent groups and movements is non-linear, and there can be non-ideological reasons for involvement; the previously mentioned finding that there are important differences between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation, and the two are not necessarily linked in a causal or linear manner; the finding that relationships between individuals and groups is often more important than internal psychological processes in radicalisation, and that radicalised settings or milieus can sometimes prove decisive in the process of motivating an individual to move towards behavioural extremism.<sup>12</sup>

A final scientific-evidentiary challenge is that there is a major lack of scientific evidence for the effectiveness and efficacy of PCVE programmes and counterterrorism in general. This is due to a number of factors, including government reluctance to either establish clear benchmarks for measuring success or share the results of internal evaluation exercises.<sup>13</sup> Given the vast resources invested and the saliency of the issue, the failure to rigorously and empirically evaluate the effectiveness of programmes and measures using transparent and agreed-upon criteria is astonishing. In part, one of

the consequences of this failure to include evaluation and assessment from the start is that ‘Radicalisation is a research topic plagued by assumption and intuition, unhappily dominated by “conventional wisdom” rather than systematic scientific and empirically based research.’<sup>14</sup>

Third, there are some practical outcome-related challenges which result from all the other problems noted thus far. One of the most obvious and well-researched issues is that the focus on beliefs and ideology, alongside the identity of the original 9/11 terrorists, has resulted in a disproportionate focus on Islam as a source of violent extremism, the widespread victimisation of Muslims due to their construction as a ‘suspect community’, and the rise of Islamophobia.<sup>15</sup> Others have noted that the way in which PCVE has been conceptualised and practiced threatens democratic pluralism through securitising forms of political opinion which fall outside of a pre-determined ‘moderate’ centre.<sup>16</sup> It can also endanger political activism and democratic participation by assuming that radical direct action, including nonviolent protest action, is a precursor to violence on the ‘pathway’ or ‘staircase’ towards violent extremism. Finally, as already mentioned, there are important ethical questions about de-radicalisation or PCVE programmes in relation to individual agency, autonomy and subjectivity – particularly in the way they function to securitise certain kinds of political beliefs and forms of expression. The PCVE imperative to regulate or transform the beliefs and feelings of individuals can be argued to constitute a form of epistemic or ontological coercion that violates individual agency and the human right of freedom of belief.

Despite these challenges, and despite the still rather slim evidence base, the academic research which has been done on PCVE nevertheless provides a few relatively robust findings and some important clues about what and where we should be looking. If we consider first the causes of terrorism and violent extremism, it is useful to focus on factors which occur in three main levels of social life: the individual level; the group level; and the social and international level. At the individual level, there are some relatively strong indications from the academic research that the following factors are all important in understanding the causes of involvement in violent extremism: individual lack of connection or social isolation; a lack of purpose or meaning; groups relationships among friends and relatives, often referred to as the ‘bunch of guys’ theory; the impact of radical contexts or milieus (including online contexts or milieus) where individuals can find purpose, meaning and motivation towards violent extremism; the role of moral injury<sup>17</sup> which ruptures an individual’s previous moral codes against violence, and which may involve exposure to repressive state violence or social violence such as racism, shaming, humiliation and so on; material and social deprivation and exclusion,<sup>18</sup> as well as blocked pathways to political expression and participation; ideologies, misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories; online spaces and communities which can play a contributing role<sup>19</sup> in the matrix of factors which move an individual towards offline violence.

A key caveat to this list of factors is the acknowledgement that in every single case there are always going to be high levels of contingency, non-linearity, and unpredictability. There is no single identifiable pathway for violent extremism, but rather '[d]ifferent pathways and mechanisms of terrorism involvement operate in different ways for different people at different points in time and perhaps in different contexts.'<sup>20</sup> There is also no identifiable profile of a terrorist or violent extremist;<sup>21</sup> it is instead highly contextual and contingent. More broadly, it is unhelpful and potentially misleading to make direct comparisons or take findings from one context and apply them to, uncritically, another: the situation in Palestine or Pakistan is not usefully comparable to the situation in the United States or New Zealand, nor is the white nationalist movement helpfully compared to a left-wing, nationalist or environmental movement.

It is also important to note that the process by which individuals become involved in violent extremism is both dynamic and comprised of a complex mix of both *push* and *pull* factors. Individuals can disengage from violent groups or contexts without necessarily de-radicalising, for example, and they can and often do move back and forth between radical and non-radical networks and milieus at different times in their lives. Further adding to the contingency of the process are the findings from ethnographic interviews with militants which demonstrate that emotions like disillusionment, life experiences like having a family, and idiosyncratic factors like falling in love, can sometimes play a key role in moving an individual towards or away from violent extremism.

When it comes to the group level, there are fairly strong research findings that the following factors are important in the causes of violent extremism: the isolation of a small radical wing from the broader political movement of which they are a part, which can lead to the construction of a radical, often violent milieu;<sup>22</sup> the forceful and oppressive actions and reactions of the authorities towards protestors or radical groups who are contesting the state's authority which rules out the possibility of de-escalation or compromise;<sup>23</sup> the development of a group ideology which provides group members with a strong identity, a sense of purpose, and an interpretive framework for action; and an enabling environment, including access to weapons and materials, broader support for the aims of the struggle, cultural norms which facilitate violence, and so on.<sup>24</sup>

At the broader social and international levels, we know from a longstanding literature that the following factors can play an important role in the generation of violent political movements and groups. First, political grievances, both real and perceived, and the political conflict they engender can provide the basis for group mobilisation and violent contestation.<sup>25</sup> For example, in the Middle East, Muslim populations have faced corrupt and autocratic rulers, lack of human rights, social deprivation and foreign military intervention. On the other hand, white supremacists in western countries perceive that they are subject to genocide in a 'great replacement'. Second, intensely politically polarised societies are highly correlated with outbreaks of political violence. Both of these situations can be intensified when there are structural or institutional blockages to the

realisation of political aspirations, and/or a lack of effective political channels. Lastly, conflicts and the violence they engender can be triggered or stimulated by the geo-politics of the international system. Both the cold war and the global war on terror have involved superpower sponsorship of oppositional groups, the provision of weapons and training, interference in other states, military operations, and so on.

In addition to what we know about the causes of violent extremism, there are now some important findings emerging about the effectiveness of PCVE programmes and approaches. Here, it is first important to acknowledge that there are two contrasting approaches to the issue: *de-radicalisation*, which involves attempts to deal with the cognitive dimension of radicalisation by transforming the beliefs of violent extremists; and *disengagement*, which attempts to deal with behavioural radicalisation by assisting violent extremists in exiting or disengaging from violent groups and milieus.<sup>26</sup> Importantly, there is to date very little to no evidence that de-radicalisation programmes are effective. This could, in part, be because governments do not share information about either the measures they use to determine success, or recidivism rates.<sup>27</sup> Anecdotal evidence shows that a number of terrorist attacks have been committed by individuals who ‘successfully’ completed de-radicalisation programmes. From one perspective, it makes sense that these programmes are limited in what they can achieve, because individual beliefs are powerfully shaped by the social context and one’s peer group. In a prison surrounded by like-minded people who reject violent ideas, an individual might genuinely believe they have been de-radicalised, but once they step back into society, face moral injury through discrimination, and re-join a radical group, they may again adopt ideas and practices which lead them down a violent path.

Beyond this general point, there are other specific findings and recommendations about PCVE which we can draw from the academic research. First, the research suggests that PCVE approaches need to be based on good evidence about the local historical, cultural and political conditions which drive radicalisation. If, for example, the main drivers are completely unconnected to religion, then de-radicalisation should be eschewed in favour of disengagement approaches. Second, and crucially, de-radicalisation is not a necessary condition for successful disengagement from violent extremism in any event; it is frequently the case that individuals disengage from violent groups and actions for other reasons while maintaining their original radical beliefs. Third, it is important to adopt a holistic, whole of society approach, as dealing with broader social ills will have direct benefits for PCVE. For example, addressing the political grievances that motivate movements and groups, reforming blocked political aspirations, and addressing social deprivation will have flow-on effects in terms of reducing levels of violent extremism.

Fourth, the provision of connection, community and support to current or former violent extremists has proven to be far more effective at disengaging them from violent activities than punishment, stigmatisation and securitisation. In particular, there is evidence that the involvement of family and friends,<sup>28</sup> the forging of social networks, the



provision of mentors, and involving the local community can be highly effective.<sup>29</sup> In other words, because ‘disengagement from violent extremism is inherently social and behavioural... building relationships, generating social bonds, and promoting a sense of belonging’ is critical to the pathway out of violence.<sup>30</sup> More generally, dealing with issues like material and social deprivation in affected communities, addressing trauma, and the provision of mental health support, among others, also has direct flow-on effects in disengaging individuals from violent extremism. Such approaches, however, rely on treating individuals holistically in non-stigmatising ways with a commitment to rehabilitation and reintegration, and building trust within and between communities and the individuals involved. A key challenge here is overcoming existing legal and cultural barriers to restorative justice-based approaches; the dominant political culture and popular attitudes views violent extremists as irredeemably evil and threatening and supports punishment and securitisation rather than rehabilitation.

Lastly, there is important emerging research that suggests that providing individuals at risk of violent extremism with purpose and opportunities to make a positive difference to society can be an important way of diverting them towards pro-social or ‘benevolent radicalisation’<sup>31</sup> instead of malevolent or violent radicalisation. That is because, contrary to the assumptions of those radicalisation models based on metaphors like ‘staircases’ or ‘conveyor belts’, there is in fact ‘a great deal of contingency involved in the choice of whether or not to become violent’ and in the ‘radicalising moment’ it is possible for individuals to choose nonviolent pathways.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the provision of opportunities for nonviolent political activism and community engagement can help individuals to re-constitute their identities in a positive way. Following this logic, and noting that the radicalisation process for joining pro-social groups is the same as for joining violent groups,<sup>33</sup> Kundnani provocatively suggests that ‘Radicalisation in the true sense of the word is the solution, not the problem.’<sup>34</sup>

To conclude this brief assessment of the broader academic literature with a generalisation, it can be suggested, among other things, that many of the current PCVE approaches employed around the world which are punitive, psychologically coercive and highly securitised lack the necessary evidence base for efficacy or effectiveness. On the other hand, holistic, community-based, rehabilitative approaches focused on disengagement show real promise. The significance of this is that it provides a useful indicative foundation for developing evidence-based PCVE policies and programmes for Aotearoa New Zealand. Such programmes could potentially be rooted in indigenous restorative justice philosophies, for example. At the very least, they ought to be tailored specifically for the New Zealand context, and focused on community cohesion, violence prevention and social justice. Moreover, as John Horgan, a leading scholar of PCVE puts it, such programmes ‘can only be effective if properly resourced, informed by evidence, rigorously evaluated, and rooted in the affected communities.’<sup>35</sup>

## Countering Terrorism in New Zealand

While the New Zealand Government has responded to the phenomenon of terrorism since the late 1970s, the past three years have seen concerted efforts to develop a new Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism Strategy.<sup>36</sup> Led by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), and forming part of a broader initiative to reform the wider national security system, the new strategy is characterised, at least in principle, by a whole-of-government, partnership-based, and prevention-oriented approach which puts enhancing social cohesion front and centre. As part of this workflow, there are also efforts to develop in consultation with community groups a specific Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Strategic Framework.<sup>37</sup> Although these policies are still in development and have yet to be resourced and institutionalised, they have already come in for criticism from security scholars, particularly for their lack of an evidence base on which to build policies, failure to include measures of effectiveness, and failure to specify the resources which will be required.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it is promising that the new Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism Strategy explicitly mentions the necessity for a ‘clear, evidence-based understanding of the evolving challenge of violent extremism and terrorism’, and ensuring that legislation is ‘fit-for-purpose’. This signals an important role for academic research and rigorous empirical evaluation.

The New Zealand Government’s ongoing effort to counter terrorism has been the subject of some academic research<sup>39</sup> and a number of official inquiries. The police operation known as Operation 8, which occurred nationally and included road blocks and involved detaining and searching people in the Ruatoki Valley to execute search warrants in 2007, was the subject of an investigation by the Independent Police Conduct Authority.<sup>40</sup> Following the public release of the executive summary of the US Senate Intelligence Committee Report entitled *Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program*, the New Zealand Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security investigated the possible involvement of New Zealand intelligence professionals in that program.<sup>41</sup> The so-called Burnham Inquiry investigated serious allegations that members of the New Zealand Special Air Services operating in Afghanistan committed war crimes by targeting civilians in reprisal attacks.<sup>42</sup> Concomitantly, the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security conducted an inquiry into the role played by New Zealand intelligence professionals providing support to the New Zealand Defence Force operation in Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup> The actions of New Zealand Police, Department of Corrections, and the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service in relation to Ahamed Aathill Mohamed Samsudeen’s knife attack at New Lynn Countdown on 3 September 2021 was the subject of coordinated investigations by the Independent Police Conduct Authority, the Department of Corrections Office of the Inspectorate, and the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps the most significant review of New Zealand counterterrorism efforts to date is contained in Part 8 of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch terrorist attack on 15 March 2019's final report, *Ko tō tatou kāinga tēnei*. It found that, while the focus of New Zealand's counterterrorism effort on the threat posed by Islamic extremism was inappropriate, this did not contribute to the Government's failure to detect Brenton Tarrant's plans and preparation for his attack.<sup>45</sup> The final report contained 18 recommendations to improve New Zealand's approach to counterterrorism, including Recommendation 14, which states:

We recommend that the Government establish a programme to fund independent New Zealand-specific research on the causes of, and measures to prevent, violent extremism and terrorism with the following provisions:

- a) the national intelligence and security agency (Recommendation 2) should be provided with a multi-year appropriation for research funding;
- b) research priorities and grant recipients should be selected by a panel comprising officials from the new intelligence and security agency (Recommendation 2) and representatives from the Advisory Group on Counter-terrorism (Recommendation 7), with Advisory Group representatives forming the majority of the selection panel;
- c) grant recipients should be encouraged to publish and present the results of their research at the annual hui on issues related to extremism and preventing, detecting and responding to current and emerging threats of violent extremism and terrorism (Recommendation 16).<sup>46</sup>

The Report explains the logic and intent behind this recommendation in the following way:

New Zealand needs to develop its own evidence-based solutions to prevent and counter extremism, violent extremism, and terrorism, built on lessons from global experience. We conclude that it would be beneficial to foster a capability in New Zealand to conduct research and collaboration into these matters in New Zealand. If this happens, we would expect that over time, these researchers would establish a network that could collaborate with overseas counterparts. The Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society is an example of an established organisation that provides research grants on issues related to counter-terrorism. The funding for this Network has diverse sources, including the Canadian Government.

We considered recommending the establishment of a new government research institute to undertake New Zealand-specific research and collaboration. However, we decided that this would be both expensive and perhaps ineffective. Such an agency would take time to establish and build capacity. It is likely to be more effective to draw on existing researchers who may have an interests in counter-terrorism issues. Consequently, we recommend that the Government establish a mechanism to provide contestable research grants to New Zealand academics and researchers. We recommend that the new national intelligence

and security agency (Recommendation 2) should be the fund holder for the contestable research grants, with research priorities decided by a panel comprising officials from that new agency and the Advisory group on Counter-terrorism (Recommendation 7), with the Advisory Group representatives holding a majority membership of that selection panel.<sup>47</sup>

Recommendation 14 is somewhat surprising given the Royal Commission of Inquiry did not set up a formal consultation process with those New Zealand academics with subject matter expertise on terrorism in particular or on security studies more generally (whereas it did so for affected whanau, survivors and witnesses of the attacks, as well as establishing a Muslim Reference Group).

While the Government accepted ‘in principle’ all of the 44 recommendations made by the Royal Commission of Inquiry, the implementation of Recommendation 14 appears to have taken a different path to that signalled by the Royal Commission.<sup>48</sup> Rather than establish a programme to fund independent New Zealand-specific research on the causes of, and measures to prevent, violent extremism and terrorism, the Government established a Centre of Research Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism. The two co-directors who were appointed might be accomplished professors in their own fields, but neither has subject-matter expertise on terrorism or security studies.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps this lack of subject-matter expertise was the reason why the Centre’s name excludes the word ‘terrorism’ even though ‘terrorism’ lies at the heart of the Royal Commission of Inquiry. Establishing the Centre in this way might encourage researchers, many of whom lack expertise in terrorism studies, to provide policy-led evidence to support the Government’s existing approaches to security, rather than the evidence-led policy that the Royal Commission of Inquiry recommended. This might also discourage research that seeks to offer an independent appraisal of New Zealand’s security policy and practice. This whole approach flies in the face of the Royal Commission’s recommendation for research that is independent from Government.

### **New Zealand Academics**

Even though officials have not yet fully realised the value of engaging meaningfully with academic subject-matter experts in New Zealand or really benefited from the international literature that evaluates counterterrorism approaches and related measures to prevent and counter violence extremism, academics from across New Zealand universities have taken steps to enhance our collective understanding of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation.<sup>50</sup> Firstly, a group of academics with subject-matter expertise on terrorism and security studies met in Auckland in early 2021 to discuss the current state of knowledge on terrorism, security and social cohesion. Acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the Royal Commission of Inquiry’s Report, the group reflected on whether academics and policymakers adequately understood the nature and scale of the problem posed by violent extremism, as well as the causes of radicalisa-

tion, or fully appreciated the limitations and weaknesses of proposed solutions to this violence. They wondered, too, if academics and policymakers really grasped what social cohesion is and what is at stake in pursuing social cohesion as a policy.<sup>51</sup> Conceding that academics are seldom the authors of governmental solutions to complex and politically urgent problems, the group appreciated the distinctive role that New Zealand-based academics can play by producing and disseminating research. To that end, they contemplated what a nationwide research agenda on violence extremism, counter-terrorism and social cohesion might look like and agreed there was enough expertise within New Zealand universities to advance such an agenda, though additional resources, including funding, was needed to unlock the potential of New Zealand's expert capability.<sup>52</sup> The group identified three key thematic questions they thought the Government could use to prioritise funding for evidence-based research in this area. These questions were:

1. What forms of social cohesion reduce the possibility of violent extremism?
2. What factors drive (online/offline) contemporary radicalisation to violence?
3. What empirical evidence shows that counter-terror responses work?

The group discussed how this new research might be fostered, coordinated and disseminated to other academics, officials and parliamentarians, as well as to the public. They considered different options, from a bricks-and-mortar national centre of excellence to a fully virtual network. The group thought the former would not only be too capital-intensive and costly, but also had too much potential for institutional capture, whereas the latter appeared to be an additional forum for academics, but without changing much of the status-quo arrangements. There was consensus for a hybrid model; that is, a virtual network of expertise on understanding and countering violent extremism and fostering social cohesion, with members located across New Zealand universities, but supported by a physical hub or hubs of some sort. The virtual network could have—through its membership of academics with an active research interest in either violent extremism, counter-terrorism or social cohesion in New Zealand—presence at all New Zealand universities. The group of academic experts provided officials with a summary of their discussion, including their three priority research themes, and a working bibliography of academic research on terrorism and violent extremism, security and social cohesion in New Zealand, as the basis for constructive discussion. Members of the group attended the *He Whenua Taurikura* Hui held in Christchurch between 14 - 16 June 2020, including a special session on establishing the centre of excellence.

Secondly, in August 2021 we issued a call for papers inviting researchers working within any academic discipline or field of study to present their work that explored, considered, or critically assessed New Zealand's approach to counterterrorism, and that enhanced our understanding of the relationship between terrorism and violent extremism on the one hand, and social inclusion and cohesion on the other hand. Our aim in hosting this symposium was to identify researchers working on these areas, provide a collegial forum that supported and enabled the sharing of this research in its various

stages of development, and to begin the longer-term process of fostering a sense of community among these researchers. We were selective in the abstracts we accepted and were delighted to accept abstracts from both early career and established academics and were pleased with the diversity of presenters.

We held our symposium, via zoom, in February 2022. Amna Kaleem, a PhD researcher at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, opened the symposium with her keynote address that gave focus to the development of the United Kingdom's Prevent Strategy since 2006, highlighting the political and ideological factors that have guided the policy's expansion in different facets of British civic life.<sup>53</sup> This was important because New Zealand security professionals tend to look to London for intelligence and security approaches and arrangements. Some papers delivered in the symposium specifically concerned the causes of terrorism, including the antecedents and aggravating factors in political violence. Discussion included how we can try to think through different approaches to understanding what drives people into political violence. The issue of state terrorism was also mentioned in some papers. This was noted as a subject that requires further analysis because states can be terrorists too, and sometimes counterterrorism measures, especially if they are harsh and repressive, can become part of the matrix that is a causal factor in terrorism. This speaks to the necessity of having forms of counterterrorism that are not reliant on deterrence, intimidation, and the use of coercion to enforce compliance, but rather based on reintegration, restorative justice and enhancing social cohesion.

Several papers engaged in a critique of the different discourses on counterterrorism and the actions, including the making of laws, taken in response to terrorism. These critiques not only draw attention to the kind of politics that are that are deeply involved in security practices, but also reveal that we cannot meaningfully talk about countering terrorism, or preventing violent extremism, through enacting anti-terrorism laws or creating Royal Commissions of Inquiry, without considering the political context and the way in which politics impinges on all these processes. These critiques demonstrate a need to engage in a deeper critical analysis that reveals political exigencies, such states' need to maintain flexibility and room to maneuver.

Several papers focused on the continuities of colonialism in New Zealand's counterterrorism approaches. New Zealand efforts to counter terrorism is not new or separate from New Zealand's political past. Rather, it has a genealogy that is deeply intertwined with its colonial history and previous security approaches. Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in some papers was the observation that the current security paradigm is a very gendered one, and therefore we must think about the ways in which gender impinges upon our understandings of, and responses to, terrorism and violent extremism. For example, on the one hand, the ideology at the heart of many white supremacist terrorists is explicitly gendered, while on the other hand, PCVE programmes often operate as if women have no place in either violent extremism or efforts to counter it.

Some papers discussed or alluded to alternative non-traditional responses to terrorism, offering different perspectives for thinking about how best to respond to acts of political violence. Approaches like restorative justice, for example, or even adopting decolonial and indigenous perspectives, provide a new focus and normative orientation to PCVE, one which involves rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals caught up in violence. This also speaks to the challenge of how, practically, to bring individuals back into the political community, and avoid deeply polarised societies, whereby some people opt out of the social contract. It speaks to the creation of a kind of counterterrorism that is integrative and inclusive rather than based on punishment and expulsion, which in many ways, has been the dominant war on terror philosophy. Helping to draw our symposium to a close, Dr Julian Droogan, an Associate Professor of Terrorism Studies at the Department of Security Studies and Criminology, Macquarie University, delivered a paper that tested whether a link between white-genocide conspiracy theories and attacks by violent extremists, particularly those from the far-right, can be supported empirically.

By framing our symposium in terms of interdisciplinarity, discussions included interventions from sometimes contrasting disciplinary perspectives, which have greatly helped to reveal different aspects of the complex phenomenon of terrorism and counterterrorism. There is a real need to embrace such trans-disciplinarity, recognise the value of taking different perspectives and appreciate the challenges that they pose to our own perspectives as well. There is no single authoritative perspective that will provide us with a comprehensive understanding of terrorism and counterterrorism. Peace and conflict studies, political science and international relations, international law, postcolonial approaches, political communications and gender studies and so on and so forth, can all provide valuable perspectives and insights on the subject.

Thirdly, given the quality of the research papers presented at our symposium, we decided to explore the possibility of a collective publication. We approached the *National Security Journal* because it provides a platform for the dissemination of high quality research by academic and security professionals on national security issues concerning New Zealand to an audience of academics and public servants, as well as non-governmental organisations, civil society groups and business leaders. By publishing this special issue in an open access journal, we hope to foster a closer interaction between New Zealand academics and their international counterparts, between academics and New Zealand security professionals, and between New Zealand security professionals and local community groups to engage with each other. While some symposium participants chose not to publish their papers, or chose to publish elsewhere, we worked closely with those participants who wanted to publish their work in this special issue. Authors who presented their papers at the symposium were given the opportunity to develop their papers based on feedback they had already received from other participants. We also invited other researchers to submit papers that would complement our collection. All of these papers were then subjected to a rigorous blind peer review by two independent

scholars with relevant expertise. After all papers were revised in light of the peer review process, we, as editors of the special issue, undertook another review of each paper. All of the papers that are published here have benefited from this robust review process.

This special issue explores the nature of the terrorist threat in New Zealand, and the broader state and society response to that threat, through a series of transdisciplinary dialogues. It begins with Chris Wilson and James Halpin offering an in-depth examination of New Zealand's main white nationalist group, Action Zealandia. Based on eighteen months of participation in the group by one of the authors, they argue that far right groups often see themselves as the seeds of a mass nationalist movement, rather than the perpetrators of mass casualty terrorist violence. In the next article, Che Tibby and Cameron Bayly find very little evidence of left-wing violent extremism occurring in New Zealand today. They warn that, while left-wing violent extremism is not currently occurring in New Zealand because several politico-social factors, which give rise to extremist violence, are absent, it would be a mistake to believe that New Zealand is immune from left-wing violent extremism, especially stochastic terrorism. They suggest an ongoing appreciation of several high-level indicators of nascent political violence would enable law enforcement and other security professionals to remain aware of politico-social developments and the potential for violent extremism without overly intrusive monitoring of individuals.

Vikrant Desai examines the merits of a criminological radicalisation model for lone actors of terrorism in a New Zealand setting. He argues for a clear distinction between the cognitive and behavioural stages of radicalisation before identifying some of the reasons behind 'why out of millions of people facing similar conditions, only the few become terrorists' by applying the Situational Action Theory of Crime to the Christchurch terror attacks. Employing a critical theory framework, Qiwei Kang explores the news media's contribution to the evolving public discourse on terrorism in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her analysis of two important media texts related to the Christchurch terrorist attack demonstrates that, while the dominant media discourse had previously reduced discussions of terrorism to Islamic terrorism, the Christchurch attack created space for an alternative perspective and the local Muslim community utilised news media to reject conventional thinking on terrorism. Kang suggests that the construction of a new, more meaningful public understanding of terrorism is possible if a wider range of authoritative speakers participate in the evolving public discourse of terrorism and if various social actors are given the opportunity to represent themselves.

The special issue shifts its focus to New Zealand's approach to countering terrorism. Lydia LeGros shows how various incidents in New Zealand's past could fall under the current definition of terrorism, but have not been officially identified or charged as such. Tracing the evolution and social context of New Zealand's counterterrorism legislation from the early colonial period to the Christchurch attacks, LeGros argues that the New Zealand Government's selective use of the terrorism label depends on the perpetrator's



identity as terrorism has been routinely framed as the fault of foreigners and cultural outsiders. Continuing this focus on New Zealand's legislative response to terrorism, Marnie Llyodd asks the vexing question: is it lawful for New Zealanders to travel overseas to participate in a foreign conflict? While political statements and travel advisories discourage the private participation of New Zealanders in the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, prohibitions in New Zealand's law are currently restricted to criminal offences related to the 'mercenary' and the 'foreign terrorist fighter.' Bringing together relevant areas of law and providing a historical account of how that law has evolved, Llyodd reveals how legislative debate continually preserves space for certain types of private involvement in transnational armed violence. Rather than seek to better understanding transnational participation in war and its policy considerations, Llyodd sees value in future research into the conditions that give rise to New Zealand's permissive legal positions taken in relation to this question.

Shirley Gabriella Achieng' sees New Zealand's counterterrorism approach stemming from Western-centric models that continue to operationalise and legitimise colonial continuities. However, the devastating attacks in Christchurch in 2019 raised concerns about the way domestic terrorism has been conceived of by New Zealand's security professionals within the Global War on Terror narrative on terrorism. By drawing parallels between New Zealand's and Africa's colonial experience, Achieng' contemplates New Zealand's counterterrorism experience through the prism of Afrocentrism, arguing that the foundation of knowledge production in counterterrorism within New Zealand is profoundly colonial. Epistemic reconstitution and pluriversality of knowledges in how terrorism is understood and dealt with in the New Zealand context is therefore desperately needed. Jeremy Simons assesses the "restorativeness" of New Zealand's current counter-terrorism approach. By expanding the concept of restorative justice articulated in the Royal Commission of Inquiry's report, Simons advocates for restorative peacebuilding as a key strategy within the broader movement for Te Tiriti-based social justice and cohesion, with Māori resistance and peace-making prioritised as critical processes. Utilising a restorative peacebuilding lens highlights the need for further development of bi-cultural, binding, bonding, bridging, and linking processes to restore social cohesion and rebuild social capital in the aftermath of acts of terrorism and violent extremism.

By understanding these topics from a diversity of disciplinary and methodological approaches, and from the varying perspectives of established senior academics, new and emerging academics, master's and doctoral students as academics-in-the-making, as well as security professionals and representatives of the news media and civil society, this collection of articles makes a valuable contribution to current discussions about how to revise and improve New Zealand's counterterrorism effort, including measures to prevent and counter violent extremism.

## Mobilising Researchers to Further Action

Finally, this introduction constitutes a call to further action among the academic community. As researchers, New Zealand academics differ from those public servants who might hold advanced research qualifications and undertake research that is necessarily circumscribed by their organisations' lawful purposes. Furthermore, those graduates are less well placed to apply recent scholarship to their respective organisations' work when compared to academics who, based in universities, are routinely involved in the production of new knowledge on terrorism and violent extremism. For fairly obvious professional reasons, most researchers within government agencies are unlikely to publicly critique the work of their employers. Academics are not bound by such fetters, but rather, are given civic responsibilities under the 2020 Education and Training Act to "accept a role as critic and conscience of society."<sup>54</sup> Academic freedom, which according to Section 267 of the Education and Training Act 2020 means, among other things, "the freedom of academic staff and students, within the law, to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions" and "the freedom of academic staff and students to engage in research."<sup>55</sup> This freedom is vital to research that aims to advance collective understanding through the production of new knowledge.

In this respect, the intellectual independence enjoyed by academics means that they do not necessarily reproduce the ways in which New Zealand's so-called counter-terrorism agencies see the world, describe themselves or justify their activities. Indeed, academics might think those views, descriptions and justifications become worthwhile objects of enquiry. Academic freedom is valuable, too, for applied research, which speaks to communities of practice that lie beyond academia. In this case, it means that their analysis and conclusions are offered without fear or expectation of favour. Put simply, they can speak a truth to bureaucratic and executive power in New Zealand. This intellectual independence is valuable to parliamentarians and public servants because its fruits enable an appraisal of New Zealand counterterrorism efforts that, in turn, create opportunities for them to engage with academic subject-matter experts in the field of terrorism and security studies. It also opens space to discuss those appraisals, and to deliberate on their significance, with concerned community groups and other members of society. In other words, the intellectual independence inherent in academic research provides the Government opportunities to bring discussion of counter-terrorism efforts into the heart of the democratic process, where it belongs.

As the roundtable discussion, research symposium and this special issue demonstrate, a group of academic experts exists, is now growing, and has proven itself capable of delivering much-needed independent research. Yet academics could make an even greater contribution to countering terrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism. New Zealand academics undertaking research into terrorism and violent extremism

could, in addition to producing research papers for academics in New Zealand and internationally, prepare briefing papers for the New Zealand Government and discussion papers for the New Zealand public. They could also deliver regular academic briefings to policy communities and politicians, advising them on recent developments in the academic literature and explaining what these developments might mean for New Zealand efforts to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism. Academic experts could host more roundtable discussions between academics and policymakers, facilitate internships (students into professional work places) and fellowships (professionals into universities) and encourage collaborative articles by academics and officials. They could host international visitors with expertise in violent extremism, counter-terrorism or social cohesion. A very modest secretariat, perhaps comprising a research coordinator and a part-time assistant, could support these academic experts by developing and maintaining a website that enables timely sharing of information, particularly on opportunities to collaborate with one another on research projects, but also on opportunities to engage with the public policy making process, and distributes new research to academics, policymakers, and the public. Other support functions performed by the secretariat might include: organising and coordinating workshops and hosting annual conferences for academic experts; organising and coordinating Public Lecture Series throughout New Zealand, including on New Zealand University campuses; establishing connections with relevant researchers and institutions based overseas; and promoting the research through media and social media, and be its public face.

However, for academics to make this unique contribution to New Zealand's understanding of causes of violent extremism and terrorism, as well as the measures to prevent these forms of political violence, the Government must honour its in-principle commitment to Recommendation 14 by establishing a programme to fund independent New Zealand-specific research on terrorism and violent extremism. That contestable fund could be allocated through a transparent process managed by an academic advisory board comprising of representatives appointed by, and drawn from, each New Zealand university. This academic advisory board could provide strategic guidance to the Advisory Group on Counter-terrorism on, say, existing relevant research, current research projects and where investment is most needed to develop New Zealand's research capability, and could make informed funding recommendations based on a collective review of applications and an evaluation of the research proposals based on their academic merit and in accordance with the Advisory Group's research priorities. This is necessary to ensure academic research remains independent from government and would give meaningful life to Recommendation 14. We conclude this call to action by encouraging the Minister responsible for leading and coordinating the response to, and implementation of, the Royal Commission of Inquiry's report to seize this propitious moment to honour the Government's promise to implement this recommendation.

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