



UNDERSTANDING TERRORISM THROUGH THE FEAR OF DEATH

Date: September 19, 2019

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented throughout the evening and does not exclusively represent the views of the speaker, or the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On September 19th, 2019, the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS) Vancouver hosted its roundtable meeting which covered “The Nature of Contemporary Terrorism.” The following presentation featured Dr. Robert Farkasch, a faculty lecturer in the Political Science Department at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Farkasch offers instruction in international political economy, international relations and terrorism studies. In his presentation, Dr. Farkasch appears to argue that religiously defined terrorism is the most dangerous ideological variant of terrorism and that the cause of terrorism is entrenched in our fear of death.

The subsequent roundtable discussion centered around a case study of Brenton Tarrant, a 28-yearold Australian man that opened fire upon two Mosques in Christchurch New Zealand earlier this year, killing 51 people. Many called the attacks Islamophobic due to his targets and the content within a 74-page manifesto that Tarrant authored and released beforehand. Audience members at the roundtable discussed the nature of Tarrant’s attacks and how social media platforms could address radical positions within online spaces.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Dr. Farkasch arguably defined terrorism as both a simple and a complex phenomenon: simple since it boils down to violence and complex in terms of what types and forms of violence warrant classification as terrorism. The presentation highlighted the distinctions between old and new forms of terrorism.

Roundtable

The roundtable discussion focused on three main issues: the growing divide between elites and the masses, climate change as the possible 5th wave of terrorism and the territorial demise of the Islamic State. The case study discussion outlined the characteristics of a terrorist attack and highlighted the distinction between terror groups and violent transnational social movements (VTSMs). Furthermore, audience members considered that radical positions online require new definitions of hate crime and hate speech.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Farkasch suggested that terrorism can be described as an act of violence perpetrated against innocents to further a political motive or goal, purposely staged to be played before an audience whose reaction of fear and terror is the desired result. Additionally, an act of terrorism must display physical acts of violence as words do not count as terrorism. Dr. Farkasch seemed to argue against the notion that terrorists are full of hate. He considered that terrorists are, on the contrary, full of love which includes love for their race, their groups and their religion.

To better understand the nature of the existential threat posed by terrorism, the current wave of religiously inspired terrorism – 4th wave terrorism – requires a differentiation between the structure and methods of older and newer expressions of terrorism. While old forms of terrorism had a strict hierarchical structure and used conventional military methods, new school terrorism has become less hierarchical and more networked.

Additionally, recent terrorism has become more transnational in reach and orientation. It aims to create an entirely new kind of social space which has no single, permanent geographical point of reference and is beyond the control of a single state. Since globalization has exacerbated feelings of individual or group alienation, people are now searching for an identity or other sources of selfworth; However, their inability to find their place in the world have led them to desperate and violent searches for a community of adherents offering them a heroic cause.

Centered initially on Islamic terrorism, the 4th wave of terrorism has spread to Christian-based identities with racial influences. Dr. Farkasch seemed to stress

that the current global wave of religious inspired terrorism is inherently rooted in the dread of mortality, such that this fear drives the desire to engage in perceived heroic acts. Engaging in a heroic act with the sacrifice of one's self-identity to a group affirming religious, racial, or political ideology can result in the perpetuation of the most heinous forms of violence in the name of eradicating evil.

Dr. Farkasch arguably claimed that the most innovative and adaptive illustration of 4th wave terrorism, that combines old and new structural organization, is ISIS. In this view, ISIS has made great use of social media to spread its message and has tapped into the millennial audience through videos, music production, and humour. Additionally, this innovation and adaptation is also observed through the following: ISIS's desire to establish its caliphate/Islamic State, their ability to tap into apocalyptic literature or vision that suggests that the world is coming to an end and that true believers will enjoy rewards when it happens, and the use of social media to display extreme violence.

Another point that Dr. Farkasch focused on was religious ideology and the underlying motivators of religious groups. While it can be argued that not every extreme ideology produces terrorism, all terrorists have an extreme ideology. Extremist religious groups, committed to a faith-based doctrine, compel people to use violence and tend to share an unwillingness to compromise given that they are defending their identity and dignity. Therefore, those who do not share the same belief system and refuse to embrace their religious identity become a threat to their identity.

Actions against the "other" could range from dehumanizing language used to describe them – such as "children of Satan", "dogs" or "Infidels" – to physical violence perpetrated against people with different beliefs systems. It can be argued that the most common reason for violence occurs when a religious group feels threatened and thinks of itself as a chosen people. It has been suggested that a meaningful difference between religious and secular violence is that religion tends to exacerbate violence.

Terrorist groups with a religious identity starkly demarcate the "in" and "out" groups, combined with a moral compulsion to eliminate evil outsiders. The underlying motivator of religious groups is described as the "cosmic war" and a struggle between good and evil. Those who are adepts perceive themselves as the vessels of the divine and death is a welcome reprieve given that the group is on the side of the divine.

Consequently, four characteristics of dangerous religious groups are as follows: apocalyptic thinking; charismatic leadership where the leader dominates the followers spiritually, sexually and emotionally; the paranoia and demonization of outsiders causing intentional isolation; and the preparation of a defensive nature, which can include the collection of guns.

Dr. Farkasch looked at some of the criticisms and objections that have been expressed about religion as a determining factor of terrorist attacks. The first criticism points out that religious motivation as a causal variable could confuse correlation with causation. The second criticism advances that although leaders are well versed in the ideological grounding espoused, this is not the case with all members within the group. Thirdly, extreme violence may be undertaken for reasons other than the ideology. Furthermore, a religious extremist ideology does not explain which individuals and groups will engage in terrorist acts. Finally, focusing on a particular extremist religious ideology as the source of terrorism may promote counter-productive othering and polarization.

It was argued that the Terror Management Theory (TMT) could address these criticisms. Several empirical studies based on the TMT theory – defensive human thinking and behavior entrenched in people’s awareness and fear of death – suggest that when confronted about their mortality people become more aggressive. Although the fear of death cannot explain all hate and violence, the fear of death remains essential to explaining terrorist actions. Dr. Farkasch wondered whether terrorists could be talked out of committing violence if they were provided with a new heroic cause and a new life purpose.

Dr. Farkasch concluded the presentation by reiterating that the root cause of terrorism is universally based on the fear of death, but its justifications have cultural and religious specificity. People choose terrorism for a variety of reasons, but religiously rooted terrorism has its ultimate end in ameliorating existential anxiety. Most importantly, the reason an individual might choose a radicalized, violent ideology instead of a more moderate ideology is infinitely complex.

Roundtable

When asked whether beliefs and identity are more important than truth in a “Trump Era,” Dr. Farkasch answered that the US President Donald Trump is illustrative of a global populist phenomenon where communities including the elite, the general population and academic circles are creating their own tribes.

With the perception that the elite have failed people and that the promises of globalization have yet to come to fruition, divisiveness within societies has grown.

When discussing whether an atheist view could lead to violence, it was argued that the Earth Liberation Front and environmental activists may possibly make up the 5th wave of terrorism. This is of particular interest when talks about climate change are being discussed in apocalyptic terms.

In addressing the reduction of ISIS territory, Dr. Farkasch advanced that having land was significantly important for training, tactics, fight preparation and the fulfillment of the [caliphate] prophecy. Furthermore, even though ISIS has lost most of its territory, the ideology remains a threat as we cannot predict ISIS's next actions. Finally, with ISIS's decentralized structure, it becomes difficult to know where violent actions are being planned.

In relation to the argument on religion exacerbating violence, the audience provided that ISIS has incorrectly interpreted the Quran and some verses have been taken out of context. The audience also recommended that the Quran needs to be taught and interpreted correctly.

Case Study

On March 15th, 2019, Brenton Tarrant, a 28-year-old Australian man opened fire upon two Mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. The attacks began at the Al Noor Mosque at 13:40 that day. Tarrant then left and opened fire at the Linwood Islamic Centre at 13:55. He took off and was arrested shortly after by police. Tarrant's weapon of choice was a semi-automatic rifle, killing 51 people in total and specifically targeting those of Islamic faith.

Roughly thirty minutes before committing the attack, Tarrant released a 74-page manifesto to thirty different agencies and offices covering his issues with contemporary society. His manifesto was titled "The Great Replacement," which is in reference to white genocide theories that speculate that people of colour are replacing or taking over white superiority. Throughout Tarrant's manifesto there were many anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiments which reinforce his fear of the great replacement. It was argued that the attacks were Islamophobic due to the contents of his manifesto and because of who he targeted. As globalization increases, the ability to share and debate ideas has become much quicker and more interconnected than ever before. Therefore, it could be argued that we will

see more of these manifestos released and possibly a spike in hate-related crimes due to the overall ‘shock impact’ these attacks create.

Dr. Farkasch argued that Tarrant’s attack could be labelled as an act of terrorism, since it falls within the operational definition of terrorism and the attack was politically motivated. However, other audience members suggested that because Tarrant appeared to be motivated by right-wing extremist (RWE) ideology, the attack could be classified as part of the greater RWE Violent Transnational Social Movement (VTSM). This point was further evidenced by the segmentary, polycentric, and reticulate nature of Tarrant’s associations and beliefs mentioned in his manifesto. For a better understanding of VTSMs, please refer to Kelshall’s (2018) chapter which can be found here: <http://vtsm.org/2018/11/15/vtasmckelshall/>.

The second part of the discussion focused on radicalization, the use of social media and the role social media platforms could play to address this issue. Audience members discussed that twitter has been useful for tracking ISIS and other extremist groups’ thoughts and online activities. Some suggested that social media platforms should remove from their platforms hateful, discriminatory or violent content. However, it was also argued that since there is not a universal definition of hate speech it becomes difficult to have enforcement mechanisms. For instance, content posted online could be hateful or discriminatory but not necessarily illegal. Therefore, new definitions of hate crime and hate speech might be required.

Lastly, Dr. Farkasch suggested that this discussion is about the essence of democracy and freedom of speech. Constitutional rights must not be determined by social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, as there may be a danger in limiting ideological views and giving up the right of freedom of expression at the discretion of these corporations.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION AND WEST COAST PERSPECTIVES

Presentation

- Islamic Jihadism is a security problem for the Canadian population as civilians are usually the targets in terrorist attacks. Individuals who are allegedly radicalized and involved in conflicts in Syria or Iraq may pose a threat to Canada’s national security if they are able to return as ISIS fighters and perpetrate violence.

- Right-wing extremist groups represent another threat to Canadian national security. These groups propagate anti-immigration views and Eurocentric values. Groups such as the III% (Three Percenters) are also engaged in paramilitary training, counter-strike tactics, and simulated cover and conceal training.

Roundtable

- Although Canada has laws that address issues relating to terrorism, it can be argued that there are not appropriate laws that can address the new wave of warfare that no longer looks like terrorism. Proper attention to right-wing extremist groups, and VTSMs more generally, in Canada is needed their presence could have further consequences for threat assessments and management of national security.
- Brenton Tarrant's attack is representative of a larger VTSM at work. The beliefs entrenched in Tarrant's manifesto – anti-Islam, pro-violence, and ethno-nationalism – are also shared by right-wing extremist movements in Canada, such as ID Canada or the Canadian Patriots. Both groups support ethno-nationalist and anti-immigrant values like Tarrant's manifesto preaches and have explicitly expressed their desire to defend Canada against immigrants with different values.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© (CASIS-VANCOUVER, 2019)

Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>