

The horror in Christchurch could have unfolded in an Australian mosque

Peter Jennings



An ambulance crew takes a man from a mosque. Picture: AP

Peter Jennings, 12:00AM March 16, 2019

14 Comments

Amid the horror of the unspeakable mass killing in Christchurch yesterday, what broader strategic questions arise from the incident? What does it mean for counter-terrorism efforts in Australia and the developed democracies? Will we ever be free from the risk of such attacks? How do we strengthen our societies to prevent more happening?

It's hard not to be emotional about the attacks on innocents at al-Noor and Linwood mosques.

Indeed, spurring violent and emotional reactions is precisely why the shooter filmed much of his work on a camera fitted to his military-style automatic weapon and live-streamed the scene as he walked from room to room shooting people. The best way surely to defeat such violent hatred will be to do what New Zealanders will now certainly do: to reach out with compassion to those who have been irretrievably hurt and to let firm justice take its course on the attackers.

Here are some immediate reactions to this tragedy, mindful that it's way too early to draw clear conclusions about what has really happened, what inner

sick motivations may have driven the attackers and what connections they may have had to others.

First, there is absolutely no reason why these attacks could not have been perpetrated against Muslim worshippers in Canberra, Sydney or any other Australian city. In fact, the policing and intelligence connections between Australia and New Zealand are such that we really should think of this as an attack on a shared jurisdiction.

Four people have been taken into custody, three directly connected to the attacks, and initial evidence suggests the shooter was a 28-year-old Australian. Obvious questions will need to be asked about his ability to operate, possibly for months, under the radar, moving between countries, acquiring military assault weapons, rigging improvised explosive devices in cars, planning the attack, planning its publicity and, it would seem, writing a manifesto designed to be found after the assault.

A second reaction is that the nature of this assault — a mass casualty shooting taking place at several locations — is precisely what police and intelligence services have been fearing since the Bataclan theatre attack in Paris in November 2015.

Because recent attacks in Australia have involved individuals with knives or, in one case, a pistol, we may have allowed ourselves to be lulled with the thought that more complex mass-casualty attacks were unlikely.

That judgment will have to be revised. What happened in peaceful and orderly New Zealand can most certainly be repeated here. A similar incident in an Australian city, especially one that may involve more than one attacker or an individual able to move quickly between several locations, would rapidly stretch police response capabilities, especially outside of Sydney and Melbourne central business districts.

Australian authorities will certainly be on high alert now and in coming days. Does the shooter have associates or sympathisers here who may be inspired to do the same thing?

A third reaction, to state the obvious, is that this looks like an attack on Muslims by at least one individual identifying as a fascist white supremacist.

The potential for violence from this segment of society is, again, something that has worried police and intelligence services.

Western European police and intelligence agencies have been alive to the threat from anti-Islamic radicals and indeed there have been some incidents in Germany and the tragic murder of Jo Cox, a British Labour Party member of parliament, in June 2016 by a mentally disturbed Nazi sympathiser. Australian authorities will be reaching for the files of neo-Nazi groups here — and they do exist — linked to bikie gangs and organised crime, “known to the authorities” and every bit as able as the Christchurch attacker to do terrible harm.

Australia has been lucky that we haven’t seen more violence directed by neo-Nazi groups against Australian Muslims. We will need to redouble efforts to stamp hard on individuals who might see this lunatic attack as a call to arms.

Reaction No 4 is to reflect with dismay on the way social media amplifies the urge to do violence in our societies. I was able to watch the gun camera footage of the attack on the mosques within seconds of looking for reporting on Christchurch. Think what that means: barely a decade ago it would have been difficult to access such horrible images. Now the challenge is to avoid them.

As the shooter wanted (and no doubt despite the well-intentioned efforts of the mainstream media), this material will remain accessible online to every teen with a grudge and to every lunatic with a manifesto. Far from liberating us, social media is hardening the world to appalling violence. There will be a constant stream of recruits looking to be the next Anders Breivik, the Norwegian far-Right terrorist who killed 77 people in a lone attack in 2011.

A fifth reaction is that what happened in Christchurch is the most powerful recruiting tool for Islamic State group since its ill-fated takeover of Mosul. Images of the attacks in New Zealand will have saturation viewing among - Islamic State sympathisers and potential recruits. The Islamic State leadership will be delighted. So, two brands of terrorism from utterly opposed ideologies both win from the perpetuation of violence against innocent Muslims.

It’s all but certain that Islamic State, al-Qa’ida and like groups will use this incident as a call to take the fight to “the far enemy” — that is, non-Muslim Westerners. We must anticipate reprisals, which could be global in nature and

will likely see a spike in violence after the “pause” in Islamic state activities since the fall of the so-called caliphate.

Sixth, in quick order we will have the usual after-the-fact calls for more to be done. Should New Zealand police be armed? Should first responders, like security guards, carry weapons? Then there will be questions about what authorities knew of the Australian attacker.

It's very likely that detailed analysis will reveal that this individual or a group of individuals underwent their own online radicalisation towards extremist violence. What is done online creates a fingerprint of an individual's activities, so questions will be asked about whether any of the attackers' activities were known about or should have been known about.

A final thought on leadership. New Zealand is fortunate to have an experienced commissioner of police in Mike Bush, who thus far is providing the calm leadership needed in the aftermath of a terrible crisis.

Spare a thought for Jacinda Ardern, for whom a disaster of this magnitude will be well beyond any previous experience.

I was working for John Howard during the time of the October 2002 Bali bombings. By that time Howard was as experienced and confident as a prime minister can be. We shouldn't underestimate the role Howard played as a comforter to a nation traumatised by that terrible atrocity. But I think it was an emotionally draining and very difficult personal experience for Howard, and a reminder that national leadership in crisis is a lonely and costly business.

Australia will undoubtedly play a role here helping New Zealand in whatever way we can and in whatever way they need. But the most vital role will be for Scott Morrison and other Australian political leaders to reach out personally to Ardern at the toughest moment of her prime ministership.

And there will be a need to reach in to our own communities, particularly Muslim Australians, with a message of support, love and compassion. This is the only kind of leadership that matters in the face of such hateful violence.

Peter Jennings is the executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.