

CHRISTCHURCH TERROR ATTACKS ON MOSQUES

IMPACT: In March 2019, a white supremacist opened fire at two mosques in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, killing 51 people and live-streaming the entire attack on Facebook. The perpetrator published a manifesto outlining his racist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic views. Following the attack, the Royal Commission of Inquiry highlighted the lack of official resources devoted to countering far-right extremism. In the aftermath, ongoing dialogues between the Muslim community and the government were established, significant changes made to the firearms licensing system, and a global initiative launched to eliminate violent extremist content online.

- On **March 15, 2019, a 28-year-old Australian carrying automatic weapons walked into two mosques (Mosque Al Noor and Linwood Islamic Centre) in the city of Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, and murdered 51 people, and injured 40 others.** The atrocities were live-streamed on Facebook. The attacker was prevented by police from his planned attack on a third mosque. The **perpetrator was handed a life sentence without parole (an unprecedented sentencing for Aotearoa New Zealand).** An August 2020 piece in the New York Times noted that the gunman is the “first criminal in New Zealand ever sentenced to life in prison with no eligibility for release.”
- Following the deadly mass shooting, the **then-Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Arden, described it as a “terrorist attack.”** Additionally, the then-Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison described the gunman as an “extremist, right-wing” terrorist. It was reported that the Christchurch gunman was Australian but had been residing in Aotearoa New Zealand for one and a half years. The **Royal Commission of Inquiry into the attack on the Christchurch mosques found that the perpetrator had “displayed racist behavior from a young age.** His life experiences appear to have fueled resentment and he became radicalized, forming extreme right-wing views about people he considered a threat.” In his manifesto, the **Christchurch gunman expressed white supremacist beliefs, including repeated references to the great replacement conspiracy theory.** The far-right conspiracy theory claims that Muslim immigrants will invade the West. Shortly after the shootings, it was revealed that the gunman had emailed the manifesto to the office of the Prime Minister just minutes before the attack.
- In the aftermath of the attacks, many in the media and the community hailed the then-Prime Minister Jacinda Arden as having had a healing effect through her cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness. This included her wearing of the hijab, and her “They are us” speech, the reading of the Quran in the Parliament, and the national broadcasting of the Friday call to prayer.
- **Immediately following the attacks, Arden established a Royal Commission of Inquiry to investigate the terror attacks** and to inquire into “what public sector agencies knew about the individual’s activities before the terrorist attack, what (if anything) they did with that information, what they could have done to prevent the terrorist attack and what they should do to prevent such terrorist attacks in the future.” The Royal Commission began its inquiry in April 2019 and delivered its final report to the Governor-General on November 26, 2020.
- A focus of the Royal Commission Inquiry was public sector security agencies. Other than finding flaws in NZ Police administration’s firearms licensing system, the Commission concluded that the attack was “not an intelligence failure” for two reasons: 1) the gunman was a lone wolf which made it hard to identify and track him, and 2) the Inquiry found that NZ’s security agencies were under-resourced and poorly regarded.

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- The **Inquiry found** there had been “**an inappropriate concentration of counter-terrorism resources on the threat of Islamist extremist terrorism**”, and the security agencies had largely neglected to monitor the rise and risk of far-right extremism. This uneven deployment of resources was not based on informed assessment or a systematic decision.
- The Inquiry attracted critics for a lack of transparency and hence public accountability. When the Royal Commission set up its terms of reference, meaningful engagement and consultation with the Muslim community was a heated issue addressed by Muslim leaders and advocates in the media. **In the five years prior to the attack, The Islamic Women Council of New Zealand (IWCNZ) had warned the government of potential hate crimes against Muslims.** IWCNZ documented their efforts to engage with the New Zealand government between 2014 and 2014 and the failures of government agencies, departments and offices within this period in a 117 page report to the Royal Commission of Inquiry. **After the attacks, Andrew Little, Minister for the Government Communications Security Bureau and the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, also acknowledged in an interview with *Stuff* that if the gunman “was a person with brown skin who came from a foreign country, I suspect it is more likely than not that somebody would have been more suspicious of him and therefore more likely to have reported him to the authorities.”** He said, “I think in reality we still have racism in this country.”
- The **Royal Commission established the Muslim Community Reference Group to support the inquiry process, which initiated an ongoing dialogue between the Muslim community and the government agencies** in Aotearoa New Zealand. Following community advocacy, including from Muslim representatives, the Inquiry extended its terms of reference to social cohesion, inclusion and diversity, but not to racism and anti-racism. The recommendations focused on the need for dialogue about diversity and inclusion as well as programs, data gathering, monitoring and evaluation and strengthening hate laws.
- Aliya Danzeisen, national coordinator of the IWCNZ and a member of the advisory groups, noted that “the commission showed a willingness to listen, to learn, to adapt, and to correct when appropriate.” Thus, despite the Muslim community’s criticism, and the media as a watchdog checking the Royal Commission’s actions, there seems to be a consensus that the Royal Commission was responsive over the years.
- The **government agreed to implement the Commission’s 44 recommendations around the themes of 1) social cohesion, education and inclusion, 2) reducing hate-motivated crime and racism, 3) firearms and safety, 4) countering terrorism and violent extremism and 5) national security system.** The Federation of Islamic Associations (FIANZ) has monitored the government’s response and is mostly satisfied with the implementation and community engagement. Access to semi-automatic firearms is now largely proscribed following legislative changes. The Christchurch Call was jointly initiated by the governments of France and Aotearoa New Zealand after the Christchurch attacks, which currently consist of 120 governments, online service providers and civil society organizations to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online.
- Despite the government’s positive response to the Commission’s recommendations in certain areas, many scholars and community leaders also point out the risk of further terrorist attacks in Aotearoa New Zealand. **The impact of the Christchurch attacks was also felt across immigrant Muslim communities in Western countries.** In Britain, Islamophobic incidents increased by almost 600 percent within a week after the attacks. The Islamophobia Register reported that in-person incidents increased four times and online attacks increased eighteen times in

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Australia within two weeks of the terrorist attack in Christchurch.

- The **Christchurch gunman held far-right views, such as the great replacement conspiracy theory, which have also been embraced by some politicians, public figures and media**, as outlined in a 2019 [piece](#) in The Intercept. **Following the Christchurch attack, there have been a number of other far-right attacks where the perpetrator's have referenced the Christchurch gunman as inspiration.** In April 2019, a [gunman](#) who held antisemitic and racist views targeted a synagogue in San Diego, California, was claimed to have been motivated by the Christchurch gunman. In August 2019, a gunman [opened fire](#) at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas claiming the shooting was “a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas,” and expressed sympathy online for the massacre in Christchurch. In August 2019, another suspected gunman who targeted a mosque in Norway, [described](#) himself as “chosen” by “Saint Tarrant.” In January 2021, authorities in Singapore [arrested](#) a teenager who had made detailed plans to imitate the Christchurch gunman by attacking two mosques on the anniversary of the Christchurch massacre. In May 2022, a gunman holding white supremacist views opened fire at the only [black-run grocery store](#) in Buffalo, NY targeting black Americans. The gunman published a manifesto citing the Christchurch attacks as motivation. Following the shooting, survivors of the Christchurch attacks were [re-traumatized](#) as they were anonymously sent the footage of the Buffalo mass shooting.
- Following the deadly attack, [Ruby Jones](#) created an illustration that went viral around the world. She drew an image of "two Kiwi women embracing – one a Muslim wearing a hijab – with the message: "This is your home and you should have been safe here". Since the mass shooting, [The Christchurch survivors](#) have battled with physical and mental pain and financial stress, but the Al Noor Mosque's membership has grown “15-20%.”

This factsheet is published in collaboration between the Bridge Initiative and researchers at the Challenging Racism Project at Western Sydney University. More information about this project can be found [here](#).

Last updated April 3, 2023