



THREAT INSIGHT

Violent Extremist threat to COVID-19 mitigation programmes in New Zealand

Issued: 10 September 2021

21-132A-TI

(R) This product assesses current violent extremist reactions to COVID-19 mitigation programmes and the likelihood of extremist violence manifesting in New Zealand in response to such programmes. This assessment does not consider non-violent protest action or non-ideological criminal acts.

(R) For the purposes of this assessment, “COVID-19 mitigation programmes” include compulsory vaccination programmes, lockdowns and travel restrictions, and proof-of-vaccination requirements [Annex 1 refers].

(R) CTAG has moderate confidence in its assessments, which are informed by a large body of partner reporting, credible open source material, and our understanding of violent extremism in New Zealand and abroad. This product was prepared in consultation with the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) and New Zealand Police.

Key Judgements

1. (R) COVID-19 mitigation programmes are opposed by various extremist beliefs subscribing to anti-vaccination (‘anti-vaxx’) rhetoric, which in New Zealand are primarily politically-motivated but have manifested across all violent extremist ideologies.
2. s6(a) [REDACTED]
3. (R) Extremist violence in opposition to COVID-19 mitigation programmes overseas is almost certain to continue, and is highly likely to influence the New Zealand terrorism threat environment over the medium term.
4. (R) In New Zealand, incidents of anti-vaxx, political-motivated extremism have recently occurred, although none have involved extremist violence or terrorism to date.
5. (R) Violent extremists are highly likely to focus attack planning on symbolic targets intended to maximise impact and attention, including COVID testing sites and screening checkpoints, vaccination clinics, and government buildings.
6. (R) We anticipate an increase in online threatening rhetoric from New Zealand-based extremists as COVID-19 mitigation programmes evolve.

Context

7. (R) Following the widespread availability of COVID-19 vaccines, an increasing number of countries have instituted mandatory vaccine programmes for portions of their government workforce, health care sectors, and broader society. Proof-of-vaccination is increasingly being asked of private individuals seeking to access public services, commercial travel and high-risk business venues, such as nightclubs and bars. Restrictions designed to curtail the spread of the Delta variant remain in place in several countries, restricting business activity and personal travel.
8. (R) New Zealand has imposed a requirement for all border workers to have had at least their first vaccine dose by 30 September 2021. The website for the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) states that businesses cannot require any individual to be vaccinated, but can require that work with a high risk of contracting and transmitting COVID-19 must only be done by vaccinated workers. Between 19 August and 8 September, New Zealand implemented its second national lockdown to combat the COVID-19 Delta variant; this lockdown remains in place for the city of Auckland.

Nexus to Violent Extremism

9. (R) CTAG continues to assess that anti-vaxx rhetoric is not inherently a violent extremist ideology.

Ideologies

10. (R) While anti-vaxx rhetoric resonates most closely with the politically-motivated extremist community – including such movements as QAnon and Sovereign Citizens – it continues to manifest across all violent extremist ideologies and is routinely used to feed identity- and faith-motivated extremist narratives. Open source reporting indicates that anti-vaxx conspiracy theories remain popular on pro-Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) social media channels, while Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, the Pakistani Taliban movement) has claimed that COVID-19 vaccinations are part of a Jewish plot to sterilise the global Muslim population.

Online Radicalisation

11. (R) We assess that anti-vaxx rhetoric has come to incorporate a wide variety of fringe conspiracy theories, many of which include elements of politically- and identity-motivated extremism. This interpenetration makes it almost certain that moderate individuals within the anti-vaxx community face increasing exposure to extremist rhetoric, with a realistic possibility of increased rates of radicalisation as a result. We judge it highly likely that violent extremist ideologues across the spectrum will continue to leverage opposition to COVID-19 mitigation programmes to advance their respective ideologies within the anti-vaxx community.

Narratives

12. (R) COVID-19 mitigation programmes run counter to a variety of extremist narratives, most of which are heavily intermingled with conspiracy theories. These

narratives, fall into two broad categories, incorporating both 'mainstream' and 'fringe' beliefs:

- a. *Control*: in which COVID-19 programmes are part of a wider effort by governments to erode civil and religious freedoms. This includes the perceived 'segregation' of non-vaccinated individuals by restricting their access to certain venues and services, as well as mass surveillance through the 5G microchips thought to be in the vaccine doses.
- b. *Depopulation*: wherein the vaccine is intended to eliminate or alter specific elements of the global population. This includes 'genocide' theories that the vaccine was created to sterilise certain ethnicities or religions, as well as the idea that the vaccine is designed to alter the DNA of the global population for nefarious purposes.

Roles

13. (R) CTAG judges that violent extremist actors typically identify as fulfilling one of two foundational roles:
 - a. (R) *Saviour*: the extremist is attempting to pre-emptively 'save' or 'preserve' a community or way of life from an external threat.
 - i. In the context of anti-vaxx extremists, this could include attempting to 'free' society from government restrictions, or stop a nefarious plot to use vaccinations to alter the DNA of the human race.
 - ii. Targets for anti-vaxx 'saviours' might include vaccination and testing venues, lockdown checkpoints, and government sites associated with COVID-19 vaccination policy.
 - b. (R) *Avenger*: the extremist is seeking to undo changes that have already occurred or to punish the perpetrators.
 - i. For anti-vaxx extremists, this role could include seeking to punish government or private industry for restricting certain modes of travel or employment to vaccinated individuals.
 - ii. Targets of anti-vaxx 'avengers' might include political figures involved in promulgating mitigation legislation, law enforcement officers implementing mitigation regulations, and private industries engaged in pro-vaccination employment practices.

New Zealand Context

14. (R) CTAG notes a number of New Zealand-based violent extremists continue to espouse anti-vaxx rhetoric, although, to date, there have been no incidents of extremist violence in New Zealand in relation to COVID-19 mitigation programmes. CTAG is aware, however, of several incidents where politically-motivated extremist rhetoric has appeared in interactions with police and government officials, including the following.

“Silent Protests”

- 15. (R) On 31 August 2021, coordinated “silent protests” occurred at various local and national government buildings across New Zealand and Australia. Pre-event advertising material indicated the protests were designed to stage a “bloodless coup” by seizing government buildings and forcing the New Zealand government to step down. The protests appear to have been minimally attended in New Zealand and attendees failed to gain access to any buildings. While there were no reports of violence, the organiser and 18 other protestors were arrested for breaching national COVID-19 restrictions.
- 16. (R) The protest was organised by a New Zealand-based Australian national who has publicly claimed that the Australian and New Zealand governments are run by Masonic paedophiles, and New Zealand’s vaccination programme constitutes “mass genocide”. This individual had previously posted material on social media calling for New Zealand politicians, bureaucrats and media figures to be tried and executed for treason, in part for their stance on COVID-19.
- 17. (R) ~~s6(a)~~ [REDACTED] we note that promotional material, online statements and disruptive tactics by supporters featured repeated and explicit use of anti-government and threatening rhetoric, combined with extensive COVID-19 misinformation and other conspiracy theories.

“We The People”

- 18. (R) As of early September, a New Zealand-based politically-motivated extremist disseminated “cease and desist orders” on social media. These documents demand the cessation of all COVID-19 mitigation programmes in New Zealand, including “COVID-19 [...] vaccinations and experimentation (genetic bio-warfare)”, masking, and quarantines. The document is intended to be given to “policy enforcers” as part of a “bloodless coup”. The document warns recipients that non-compliance makes them liable for “crimes against humanity” before a “People’s tribunal”, and encourages recipients to join “We The People” against “tyranny”. The form claims to be “educational in purpose” and contains no explicit threat of violence.
- 19. (R) ~~s6(a)~~ [REDACTED]
- 20. (R) ~~s6(a)~~ [REDACTED]

s6(a)

Domestic Threat Outlook

21. (R) s6(a) Globally, however, CTAG assesses that violent opposition to COVID-19 mitigation programmes is almost certain to continue as governments and private industry continue to implement vaccination requirements to function in day-to-day civil society. We further assess this increase is likely to have an impact on the New Zealand terrorism threat environment over the near- to medium-term.
22. (R) In New Zealand, anti-vaxx rhetoric appears most prevalent among politically-motivated extremists and, to a lesser extent, identity- and faith-motivated extremists.
23. (R) s6(a) CTAG assesses the majority of anti-vaxx extremists in New Zealand are highly likely to have incorporated anti-vaxx into pre-existing personal grievances and extremist ideologies.
24. (R) We assess the majority of those opposed to COVID-19 mitigation programmes in New Zealand are currently highly unlikely to have the intent to conduct an act of real-world violence.

Potential Targets

25. (R) CTAG notes New Zealand has not had to implement prolonged mitigation measures seen in other Western countries, and we assess this has currently positioned New Zealand-based anti-vaxx extremists in 'saviour' roles. We judge it highly likely, however, that the implementation of more restrictive measures will shift some New Zealand-based violent extremists into 'avenger' roles, as non-vaccinated individuals are – or perceive themselves to be – denied access to areas of employment, travel or society.
26. (R) CTAG continues to assess that crowded places remain highly attractive targets for violent extremists across the ideological spectrum. Within the context of anti-vaxx violent extremism, and consistent with overseas examples, we judge that threat actors are highly likely to focus on symbolic targets intended to maximise impact and attention. This is almost certain to include COVID testing sites and screening checkpoints, vaccination clinics, and government buildings associated with COVID-19 mitigation programmes and legislation.
27. (R) We further assess it is plausible public venues and private businesses enforcing mitigation measures, such as proof-of-vaccination documents and masking, could also be the targets of opportunistic or spontaneous acts of anti-vaxx extremist violence in New Zealand. Given the intermingling of extremist ideology with personal grievances in the anti-vaxx space, we assess that security agencies will likely be

challenged to distinguish those acts of violence intended to advance an ideological objective from those prompted by individual agendas.

Threatening Rhetoric

28. (R) CTAG anticipates an increase in online threatening rhetoric from New Zealand-based extremists as COVID-19 mitigation programmes develop, both globally and nationally, and as violent opposition to these programmes overseas receives more attention in media channels. We assess this is most likely in the event New Zealand institutes – or is perceived to be planning – more restrictive mitigation measures, such as a mandatory vaccination programme as seen in other Western nations.

Intelligence cut-off date: 10 September 2021

Annex 1

1. (R) CTAG defines COVID-19 mitigation programmes as including the following:
 - a. Compulsory vaccination programmes. This includes, but is not limited to, government-led vaccination and testing mandates for public sector workforces and the general population, as well as private sector restrictions on employment by non-vaccinated individuals.
 - b. Lockdowns and travel restrictions. This includes lockdowns, internal and international border controls and travel restrictions, and managed isolation and quarantine regulations.
 - c. Proof-of-vaccination requirements. This includes the institution of “vaccine passports” or similar documentation as a requirement for international or domestic travel, accessing government services, public venues or private businesses.

HANDLING INSTRUCTIONS

This information is the property of the Combined Threat Assessment Group and is provided to your agency for intelligence purposes only. It may be read by any person in your agency cleared to the classification level of the document with a need to know the information contained in the document, but must not be disseminated outside your agency without the prior written consent of the CTAG Manager. It must not be used or disclosed in any legal, administrative, or review proceedings, nor reclassified, declassified or disclosed under any freedom of information law, without the prior written consent of the CTAG Manager. Electronic systems used to store this material must be accredited at the appropriate level and protected against unauthorised access.

Any CTAG assessment material extracted or copied MUST be accorded the same protection in all respects as the original material, including all caveats and handling instructions.

Queries or feedback can be provided to the following:

s6(a)



CTAG Threat Definitions

Likelihood Assessment	Threat Level
Terrorist attack, or violent protest, or violent crime is expected	EXTREME
Terrorist attack, or violent protest, or violent crime is assessed as highly likely	HIGH
Terrorist attack, or violent protest, or violent crime is assessed as feasible and could well occur	MEDIUM
Terrorist attack, or violent protest, or violent crime is assessed as a realistic possibility	LOW
Terrorist attack, or violent protest, or violent crime is assessed as unlikely	VERY LOW

Probabilistic language

<< Lower likelihood		Even chance		Higher likelihood >>	
Remote/Highly unlikely	Unlikely	Realistic possibility	Likely Probable Probably	Highly likely	Almost certain