

Why was the New Zealand stabbing attack not prevented?

Tom Peters
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Over the past week, New Zealand's Labour Party-led government has released more information regarding the perpetrator of the September 3 stabbing attack in the Countdown supermarket in New Lynn, Auckland. The material raises questions about why the attack was not prevented.

Seven people were injured when 32-year-old Ahamed Aathill Mohamed Samsudeen picked up a knife in the supermarket and began stabbing people indiscriminately. The horrific attack sparked panic among shoppers, who fled for safety. Within about two minutes, armed police who had been tailing Samsudeen and monitoring his movements, arrived on the scene and shot him dead.

On Wednesday, three victims remained in hospital in a stable condition.

Like many terrorists in Europe and the United States, Samsudeen, who was inspired by Islamic State (ISIS) propaganda, was well-known to police and the intelligence agencies. He first came to the attention of authorities in 2016 after posting extremist statements on social media. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and other politicians had been briefed on the risk he posed.

Ardern told the media immediately after the attack that everything possible had been done to try and keep Samsudeen in prison, and when this proved impossible he was put under "constant" police surveillance. The government was also in the process of trying to revoke his refugee status and deport him.

Samsudeen came to New Zealand in 2011 as a Tamil refugee from Sri Lanka. His family, who are still in Sri Lanka, issued a statement saying, "We are heartbroken by this terrible event... We are thinking of the injured, both mentally and physically." They said Samsudeen's "mental health got worse and worse during the last 10 years or so" and was not helped by spending time in

prison. "The prisons and the situation was hard on him and he did not have any support. He told us he was assaulted there."

The government has characterised Samsudeen as a "lone wolf" attacker, radicalised online, but his mother told a Sri Lankan TV station she believed he was "brainwashed" by neighbours in New Zealand, who were from Syria and Iraq. Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson told TVNZ there was no evidence to support this claim.

Samsudeen spent a total of four years on remand in prison, on various charges. In 2017 he was arrested and jailed after seeking to leave the country, apparently to fight for ISIS in Syria. The United States and its allies had fuelled the growth of ISIS by pouring weapons and funding into Syria in support of militias fighting to topple the Assad regime.

In June 2018 he pled guilty to several charges, including the distribution of objectionable ISIS material. He was later charged with possession of a hunting knife, with intent to use it in a violent attack.

In mid-2020 the Crown sought to charge Samsudeen with planning a terrorist attack, but a judge rejected this because there is currently no such offence in the law. The government is now seeking to rush an amendment to the Terrorism Suppression Act through parliament to make it a crime to plan a terror attack.

Media reports mention that Samsudeen spent his final year in prison in the same maximum security unit as the fascist terrorist Brenton Tarrant, who massacred 51 people at two Christchurch mosques on March 15, 2019. They do not say that the two had any contact with each other, but being in close proximity to the violent white supremacist may well have fuelled Samsudeen's own extremist views.

Robertson said authorities had tried to address

Samsudeen's mental health issues but "none of those attempts have been able to change the state of mind." In fact, reports indicate that authorities rejected offers to help with his rehabilitation.

At the time of the supermarket attack, Samsudeen was on bail for another charge of allegedly assaulting a prison guard. He had been released just seven weeks earlier to live in a flat next to Masjid-e-Bilal, a small Auckland mosque. Corrections department spokesperson Rachel Leota described him to Radio NZ (RNZ) as "a very, very difficult person to manage" who "was increasingly openly hostile and abusive toward probation staff."

New Zealand Muslim Association (NZMA) president Ikhlaq Kashkari told RNZ on September 6 that the mosque, run by volunteers, was "not equipped to deal with someone like that." He questioned whether the department had provided appropriate resources and assistance.

Kashkari said he was "baffled" that Corrections had turned down the NZMA's offer to help rehabilitate Samsudeen. "I feel that they did not want to have formal accountability once he was out because what I was asking for was for formal accountability and responsibility," he said.

Criminologist Dr Clarke Jones wrote in the *Guardian* that during Samsudeen's trial in 2018, "his legal team and I offered to run a bespoke, community-led intervention program to support Samsudeen in his transition out of prison, with one of its aims to alter his extreme views." The crown acknowledged that the program had been successful with Muslim youth in the past, but "the police opted for a different approach... choosing surveillance and monitoring over rehabilitation."

Jones wrote that in 2018 "Samsudeen showed clear signs of depression and post-traumatic stress." He had suffered "persecution, kidnapping and torture in Sri Lanka, being labelled a terrorist and held in solitary confinement with no professional support." The problems were made worse by his isolation from his family. Jones had advised the courts at the time "that addressing his mental issues would be a critical factor for successful reintegration back into the community."

Police have said that Samsudeen was extremely "paranoid" about being followed, indicating that he was aware of the state's surveillance and this worsened

his mental state.

The government has given no clear explanation for why multiple offers to help rehabilitate Samsudeen were rejected, and instead he was housed next to a mosque that could not deal with his extremely challenging issues. Ardern repeated to the media on September 6: "I'm confident that agencies did everything within their power to keep the community safe."

Meanwhile, the government is responding to the attack, as it did with the Christchurch massacre, by increasing the state's powers.

Ardern said the amendment to the Terrorism Suppression Act will be passed by the end of the month to make planning a terror attack a crime. Deputy PM Robertson has said the government will also review immigration laws to determine whether the process of deporting someone with refugee status can be made easier, and potentially increase the state's power to detain someone while it seeks to deport them. The government is also seeking to pass "hate speech" laws, which could easily be used against left-wing and socialist criticism.



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