



A Macdonald-Laurier Institute Publication

Commentary

May 2015

Facing the Challenge of Violent Extremism in Canada

This article is based on testimony by Macdonald-Laurier Institute Senior Fellow Christian Leuprecht before the Senate Standing Committee on National Security and Defence during hearings on security threats facing Canada on May 4, 2015. Dr. Leuprecht's remarks and senators' questions have been edited and condensed.

Christian Leuprecht

We live in a diverse country, so I think ultimately we're always going to have challenges with people reaching out to groups across the world with whom they feel they have an affinity and are supporting their cause in one way or another, whether the government approves or not. Similarly, we will always, as a result, also have a challenge with groups or even quasi-state actors reaching back into Canada to fund certain institutions or possibly even causes of which we might not be too enthusiastic.

Given that we are a wealthy and free society, there is always the risk that people will avail themselves of the freedoms that our Constitution affords them, either to try to fund or otherwise provide support for organizations that run directly counter to our national interest.

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We need to distinguish between the problem of mass radicalization on the one hand and the small remnant of individuals who are willing to take sympathies for radical causes and translate them into terrorist action.

If you think about politically motivated violent extremism, you often think about this as a language one might be exposed to on the Internet and in pamphlets and whatnot, but it doesn't make a whole lot of sense until you have an opportunity to talk to someone. It's this ability to interact that helps reinforce the particular stereotypes that people have and translate them into action.

Now, when we talk about individuals who are looking to move from thought to action, there is not necessarily an immediate social policy solution that would mitigate that particular risk. I'll get back to countering and preventing violent extremism in a moment, so I want to couch that with a caveat.

What I'm apprehensive about is government throwing a whole bunch of money at programs in the hope that somehow that will solve the problem. There are lots of people who are poor, alienated and do not engage in terrorism. It is not a problem with a single cause.

When we talk about inflows of money – which for me is certainly a concern and over which recently the National Security Adviser also voiced concern – the challenge here is one of reciprocity, that Canadians and Canada would not be allowed to fund the types of activities that some governments, para-government institutions or individuals from certain countries are funding in Canada. I've always thought that this needs to work on reciprocity, but it is very difficult to curtail this type of funding coming in from abroad because it doesn't tend to come directly from countries; it tends to come via a number of different actors. So the origin can often be difficult to trace.

In terms of outflow of terrorist financing, there is the problem of destination. It might be helpful to think about whether we can establish a list of individuals who are associated with terrorist organizations and that providing money to them becomes essentially an offence.

This is what I call “terrorists, too, need to go to the dentist.” It is hard to demonstrate that any particular money that is funnelled to individuals is then used necessarily for violent purposes. But there may be a deterrent effect to keeping such a list. I will get back to this in the recommendations.

There are two types of fundraising that we need to distinguish when it comes to individuals. One is the prevalent problem of travel, individuals who go around and all they need to do is raise a couple of thousand dollars so they can get on a plane. It's relatively easy to do that, and it's very difficult for our security services to catch on that that's what's going on. In many ways they raise the money perfectly legally; it's just the action that is illegal. There is a challenge there.

But the individual funding problem and the group funding problems are two distinct problems, so we shouldn't conflate them.

The problem of funding organizations has become less, because increasingly terrorist organizations are relying on own-source funding. If you look at ISIS (or Islamic State), it doesn't primarily need to draw on funds brought in from abroad the way, for instance, the Tamil Tigers used to do. I think this is a general trend.

I also want to point out to the committee the convergence of organized crime and terrorist financing. This is somewhat amorphous. The empirical evidence here is a bit sketchy. But especially with regard to Hezbollah, we have some pretty convincing work, especially concerning activity in the United States.

We have also have Mokhtar Belmokhtar in northwest Africa. He's known as “Mr. Marlboro” for a reason. So we should be looking at organized crime – in particular, issues such as contraband cigarettes, contraband tobacco, or untaxed tobacco, as some population groups in this country like to refer to it. This is a concern

in the way organizations set up organized crime operations, not just in North America but across the world, and in particular there is concern about Hezbollah using funds from contraband in order to fund their activities. So going after illegal activities and organized crime also has a direct repercussion on being able to undermine funding for terrorist organizations, although the links in Canada are somewhat amorphous on the particular issues.

Why are we not investigating this phenomenon in Canada? To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever been charged in this country for offshore money laundering and no one has been charged for offshore tax evasion. Arthur Cockfield, at Queen's University, has done very interesting work on this. Only one person in this country has ever been charged for terrorist financing, and that particular case was like taking candy from a baby because he was so overt and it was such a small sum.

If we know we have a challenge here, why is it that on the legal side it seems to be very difficult to do anything about it?

I would make the following recommendations:

Develop the necessary skills: I am not convinced we have the requisite professional development mechanisms to build the skill sets and recruit the skill sets into our national security organizations – in particular, on the law enforcement side – that are necessary in order to get a handle on this particular issue. Some countries do somewhat better at this – the Americans, for instance. One of the reasons they do better is that they have a completely different professional development and recruitment mechanism to make sure they can actually have specialized units that can deal with this particular problem. But even for the U.S. it's a challenge because it's often just very high-value targets they go after.

The RCMP is doing far too much: The Mounties should get out of the business of contract policing for provinces and municipalities so that we would actually have an organization that can focus on federal priorities.

Address the listing regime: It took until 2012 in this country, to the best of my knowledge, to list the Taliban as an organization on our terrorist scheduling. This shows that the process is exceptionally inefficient. Also, if you look at terrorist organizations in North Africa for example, they are constantly morphing. So, even if your organization makes it on the scheduled list of illegal organizations in this country, all you need to do is change your name and you're off the list, because it will take us years to get you back on the list. This is exactly what they do, but they usually don't change the name in order to evade financing enforcement; they change the name because they split internally. Even so, our system is simply way too inflexible to keep up.

Take on the data-sharing challenge: We have a great financial intelligence tracking agency, FINTRAC (the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada). But it's very difficult for this agency to share the data with law enforcement so we can undertake the appropriate investigations into cases of money laundering and terrorist financing.

We need to generate more research: We don't have a whole lot of good empirical patterns for law enforcement to go on. We need more research so that law enforcement officials, when they want to get a warrant or go in front of a judge and they want to arraign someone, and the judge says to them, "Well, you're just profiling this individual," we can say to him, "No, we're not," because we know that this particular pattern tends to be disproportionately associated with people who engage in financing terrorism, or recruiting, or whatever it might be. I think we have incipient research here that we can demonstrate this is an issue. Similarly, in no Western country that I'm aware of do we have consistent

longitudinal survey data to see whether there are problems of radicalization in communities. You need a baseline to detect a change within communities that might be of particular concern to us. But by virtue of not having a baseline, it's very difficult for us to detect any shift in thinking.

Recognize that all security is local, just like all politics is local: We can't have the RCMP and CSIS trying to counter violent extremism in local communities. It's like having the federal government take out our garbage. There is a reason for not having the federal government take out our garbage. We need to get around to what federal institutions can do to reinforce local capacity of local actors and provincial actors. I think we're coming around to that, but not as quickly as we can.

And there's a lot that we can do on the capacity building side, in particular working through the UN Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the work that the Department of Foreign Affairs does and the financing that the government has provided for that capacity building.

Ultimately, if you have a challenge with terrorist financing, it's partially because we have a challenge with these organizations proliferating. Rather than sending our Canadian Armed Forces to go firefighting across the world, we need to be more proactive. The government has done very good things here that aren't getting enough press and I think that any future governments would continue to do, but there's more to do on the capacity building side. We have a very good whole-of-government effort going on that.

Senator Mitchell: Why is it that we always jump to the conclusion that there is all this terrorist financing going on if there's no evidence that it's going on?

Dr. Leuprecht: We don't have a lot of open source evidence. With Hezbollah we're starting to get there. I'd be happy to share with the committee some of the work that we've done in that regard to demonstrate the specific links. There is also a very good book published by the National Defence University Press in Washington called *Convergence* with regard to organized crime and terrorist networks.

I would also say that part of this is a sampling issue. Just because we are not arresting people doesn't mean that the phenomenon is not occurring. The challenge is that it is a very complex phenomenon to investigate and to bring to trial at the standards of evidence that would be required to obtain a conviction.

In terms of funding to organizations it might be less of a challenge than it has been in the past because organizations have their own funding, but obtaining a couple of thousand dollars to get a plane ticket, in essence that's funding. It becomes partly a question of what you consider to be terrorist funding. Does obtaining funds to leave the country qualify as terrorist financing? The challenge is that much of these monies aren't illegal monies. It's essentially the converse of money laundering. With regard to money laundering, you're taking illegal money and trying to make it legal. Here you're taking legal money and using it for illicit purposes, and this is a considerable challenge to demonstrate.

As I say, even if we can show that it goes to someone abroad, to be able to demonstrate that it was sent abroad for the purpose of supporting a violent extremist organization as opposed to for somebody to pay their rent can become very challenging.

Senator Stewart Olsen: I don't think you think the current programs for dealing with radicalization are very effective. Can you expand on that? Can you deal a bit with the outreach and the social programs?

Dr. Leuprecht: First, I think the paradigm is quickly shifting from countering to prevention. If we're talking about prevention, it's ultimately a multi-level governance effort because it's going to be a local effort.

How do we go about this? We have some examples. We have the U.K. “Channel” program, a program in Belgium, the LinCT Program (Leaders International Counter-Terrorism) in L.A., and at least two pilots in Canada. We don’t have much evidence yet that they are effective.

There are “hub” models which focus on countering people who are susceptible to falling into the criminal justice system, especially youth. We try to get the employment and student counsellors and mental health folks all together to get early intervention going. Should the RCMP and CSIS plug into these types of hubs or set up their own hub specifically directed at countering violent extremism? Does it undermine the efforts and the relationships with communities? We don’t know. We need to actually engage with those communities on an academic level.

What type of activities are the most effective? With the U.K. Prevent program, for instance, I had great apprehensions about it, as did many people in the U.K., of teachers identifying kids that they think might be susceptible and then handing them off to the Prevent program. I think you get a huge amount of false positives as opposed to focusing on the individuals.

Then there is the challenge of focusing on communities versus focusing on individuals, and finding those needles in the haystack and working actively with them.

All of that is to say that I think we have a nice program and we have a nice effort. On the law enforcement side we do a very good job of working together. With countering violent extremism, on the prevention side we still have a lot to learn not just about the whole-of-government approach but an effective multi-level governance approach. In a federation, this is going to look different in different provinces because the challenge is different and because the organizations and the legal frameworks are different. I don’t see enough of the agility and the nuances in that particular approach.

I’m also concerned that there are a lot of unfunded mandates here. We’re going to local communities and telling them this is what we need them to do, but we’re not providing the adequate resources or the types of training needed. My argument is that national security is ultimately a federal government responsibility, so the federal government needs to step up both with professional development and with training for local individuals, but it also need to step up with resources. We can’t expect the Edmonton Police Service to stand up a counterterrorism task force to counter violent extremism and then say to local taxpayers, “It’s your problem, so you need to fund it all.” I don’t think that’s on in a federation. We haven’t done anywhere near enough to figure out how we can support effective local efforts federally so that the taxpayers know they’re getting value for the money.

Senator Dagenais: I believe that you are saying that there is a lot foreign money that is transferred to Canada or to other peaceful countries. I think that some of this money may be used to fund propaganda in universities where recruitment is well and truly possible.

In your opinion, is there more information available on this phenomenon that you have partially explained? Should we be worried about it and should we tighten security around this?

Dr. Leuprecht: I am not aware of formal studies that could help us to understand the scale of the situation apart from evidence presented before your committee.

My worry is that there is a possibility that certain religious groups, for example, come to Canada and, in the medium term, influence certain institutions where they spread their message. This is not a concern for the immediate future; however, in the medium term, we fear that this may influence the way that people interpret their religion’s holy books.

Some countries have taken very concrete measures. That is one of the reasons why the United Kingdom now

licences preachers, in order to try and establish a kind of public regulation of people who may be funded. However, I do not believe that we are faced with an immediate problem regarding sums that could be used to fund institutions that would actively spread violent extremist propaganda. Our problems here are not as significant as they are in the United Kingdom.

Countering the violent extremism of individuals who return from foreign conflicts in places such as Syria or Iraq is something we have not thought about strategically. We just think about people who are already in our communities. We haven't thought enough about the fact that 90 per cent of the people who return are either heavily disillusioned and/or have serious mental health problems, are shunned by their communities, friends and, in many cases in Europe, by their families. Around 10 per cent of returnees come back as very hardened ideologues.

I think we haven't thought systemically about how we engage with individuals like that who might come back and engage in action, financing, recruitment or any other terrorism-related activities back here. If they are citizens, it will require us to have a very well-thought-through strategy and to make sure it also is within the rule of law.

Senator White: What would the solution be to replacing the RCMP in the provinces they're contracted out to and the 800 communities they police in presently as a front-line police service?

Dr. Leuprecht: I think the system works fine in Ontario and Quebec with regard to provincial policing. Historically, there are provinces out West that, as you know, have had or have systemically thought about this.

It would be a matter of the federal government coming to a financial arrangement with the appropriate provinces to be able to do this; but given that we don't actually have one national police force, every division is pretty much more or less an autonomous actor.

Given that two thirds of what the RCMP does is on the contract policing side, it pulls so much attention, so many resources and also some of the most severe problems that the RCMP runs into. If money is the only problem, I think we can find a financial arrangement.

Senator White: Why wouldn't we shift toward a European model of one police service, one country? The Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Norway – I can go on and on. We have 198 police agencies in this country now. I'm not sure another 15 will make us better or worse, but why wouldn't we shift to one?

Dr. Leuprecht: We live in a federation, and some of the countries you just cited are not federations. In the federations in Europe that we do have, the division of powers is quite different than it is in Canada.

There is no evidence that a centralized system necessarily gives you better outcomes, and I think a centralized system isn't going to be an option in our federation. I think that's a bit of a straw man as an argument.

Senator White: So who is doing it right?

Dr. Leuprecht: I can tell you that no police force in a democratic country that I'm aware of has the magnitude of remit that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police has and that comes with the institutional cultural challenges that the RCMP has. I think that compound effect is not giving us optimal outcomes in terms of the type of national security investigations that we are asking the organization to do.

I think the litmus test here is the two attacks that we saw in October (in Ottawa and Saint Jean sur Richelieu). You have seen RCMP Commissioner Bob Paulson come before a parliamentary committee suggesting essentially breaking up his organization, just trying to provide the necessary search capacity.

Just imagine if he had a more challenging type of security environment. If we are considering breaking the organization, after two of these types of attacks, to kind of get a handle on the problem, I think it suggests that perhaps the organization is not as agile and not as flexible and doesn't have all of the capacities in its current institutional setup that we need it to have in order to cope with these challenges.

Senator Day: In relation to the study that you did, could you tell us if you got into identifying the respondents according to whether they happened to be Sunni or Shi'ite or where their country of origin was, the kind of information that might help you in coming to some conclusions that certain groups have different points of view than other Muslim communities?

Dr. Leuprecht: That's a very interesting question. Iranian expats, for instance, showed up as particularly moderate, even more moderate than the general overall baseline within the study overall. There is nothing necessarily about a particular religious trend that makes, for instance, Shia more predisposed to extremism. A lot seems to have to do with the endogenous effects. When you leave a country probably for reasons of a religious-inspired, authoritarian regime, then you are probably not going to be particularly predisposed to the ideas that that particular regime is peddling.

We can't just paint the Muslim community with a broad brush stroke.

So whether you are Sunni or Shia seems to matter. Your country of origin seems to matter. How long you have been in Canada seems to matter. At what age you showed up in Canada seems to matter. There are a number of determinants.

I would add that I do think, to some extent, we have an obligation toward people who do travel abroad. The state protects people from their own stupidity all the time. We make people wear seatbelts and whatnot. To some extent there's an argument to be made that we have a certain obligation, but we definitely have that obligation for individuals who are under 18. When we see teenagers leaving the country or attempting to leave the country to join foreign conflicts or radical groups, and we're unable to stop them, then I think we, as a state, have failed in our obligation to make sure that we protect people from themselves. As you know, we have lots of special provisions for people who are minors, and I think, on this particular issue, we are not, at least in the current environment, either doing enough or able to do enough.

Senator Beyak: I noticed in your paper on homegrown Islamist radicalization in Canada that you said a good deal of government policy, especially in the U.K. and Western Europe, has been geared to the response that if we make them happier by including them, by outreaching, with social housing, it will solve the problem of radicalization. You disagree with that, and I do as well. I wondered if you could explain what is wrong with the approach and why you feel that the outreach solution isn't the answer.

Dr. Leuprecht: It gets us back to our earlier discussion that these are two separate problems – the problem of mass radicalization and the problem of individuals who are looking to move to action. There are lots of things to be said about people who, for instance, feel alienated from our society for socioeconomic or political reasons, but we can show that that doesn't seem to have an immediate causal connection to the individuals who engage in action. If this was the causal driver, we would see a much bigger problem than we actually do. I think we need to be careful to make sure that we adequately support and target our efforts with the outcomes that we have in mind.

The Chair: Underpinning a lot of the movement across the world is a continuous belief system that is being taught in some quarters. Now, we have been told that within Muslim communities – and I use the plural “communities,” because there are many communities within that religious denomination – two areas have come up in discussion over our hearings. One is the Wahhabi doctrinaire and

the other is the Salafi doctrinaire, an extreme jihadist doctrinaire that is taught in some quarters. We don't know where or by whom, but obviously it is giving the basis and the moral authority for individuals eventually to take action. It would seem that that's the area for the beginning of this – work with the Muslim communities such that that type of doctrinaire should be denounced every day, day in and day out, so that it doesn't become the reason and the immoral foundation for the actions that we see later on.

Dr. Leuprecht: A German study just came out trying to get a handle on these numbers. It is estimated that the Salafi jihadists in Germany number about 200, but they disproportionately show up in the disconcerting types of activities relative to the very small numbers they constitute.

From a comparative perspective, I would also draw your attention to the following: If the problem was the same across the world, we would see roughly the same number of people per capita leaving. But we know, for instance, that in Belgium and Germany, two countries that border one another, it is estimated that each has had about 600 people or so leave. These aren't huge numbers, but Germany is a country that is about eight times the population of Belgium. It suggests that there are things we can do on the policy side that can make it more or less enticing for a small remnant of people to buy into that particular discourse.

That's where we then get into issues of systemic unemployment and hopelessness within communities. That's where we get into issues around what sort of wardrobe we do or don't condone in terms of public spaces. Canada needs to think long and hard about that environment. We are always concerned about an environment that causes people to leave. There is interest in the ones we would see in social science, but I'm really interested in the zeros, in all the people who aren't doing anything.

In Canada, we seem to be doing reasonably well on the zeros. What do we need to continue to do to reinforce to make sure we get those zeros?

Inherently, non-events become difficult to measure, but there's something interesting to study about non-events of very small numbers in different contexts. I would say that we are doing many things right in this country and that we could be doing some things better.

About the Author



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