

Canadian Terrorists

Stewart BELL*

A few weeks ago I sat on a panel much like this one at a policy conference in Calgary. The topic was: International Terrorism: A Canadian Connection? What was astounding to me was that the organizers had felt compelled to put that question mark at the end, as if there were any doubt that international terrorism had a Canadian connection. Perhaps they were only trying to be impartial, or maybe they had been listening too closely to the Liberal Cabinet.

Because if you were to take what our ministers have said at face value, you might actually believe that Canada does not have a terrorism problem. The Government spin since September 11, and well before, has been that Canada does not have a *terrorism* problem, it just has an *image* problem. For some reason, Canada has been wrongly branded a safe haven for terrorists, they tell us. And so, what is needed is not counter-terrorism, but public relations to ease the minds of Americans misinformed by irresponsible journalists.

Certainly the Prime Minister has been one of the main proponents of this fantasy. Last fall, he actually told the House of Commons: "I am not aware at this time of a cell known to the police to be operating in Canada with the intention of carrying out terrorism in Canada or elsewhere."

No terrorists here, he tells us.

Even the Royal Canadian Air Farce comedy troop saw through that one, and parodied his denial in a skit.

* Journalist, National Post, Toronto, Ontario.

Well, there is a Canadian connection to international terrorism. Even a casual newspaper reader could probably come up with at least a couple of names of terrorists who have used Canada as an offshore base.

How about Talwinder Singh Parmar, the Burnaby B.C. man suspected of orchestrating the Air India bombing? Or Ahmad Khadr, the Ottawa aid worker who the United Nations says provides aid all right—to Oussama Ben Laden? Furthermore, what about Ahmed Ressay, the Algerian terrorist we now know tried to bomb Los Angeles airport?

In his testimony to the Federal Court of Canada, Mourad Ikhlef, a member of Ressay's Armed Islamic Group cell in Montreal, spoke of an Arabic song he had heard in his homeland. "We are going to Canada, and even if we end up planting lettuce, we will be happy." No doubt, Mr. Ikhlef was happy with his new life in Canada. He was not planting vegetables, though, he was plotting to plant bombs at one of the busiest airports in North America.

Even if the PM missed these stories in the papers, you would think he would have gotten the message from his advisors. Canada's intelligence, police and immigration departments have been warning the Government for years that the world's major terrorist groups had established offshore bases in Canadian cities, and that they are using Canada as a staging ground for political and religious violence around the world.

We know that at least 20 operatives of the Al-Qaeda group of Oussama Ben Laden have been working within Canada, and Government officials say the organization has a significant presence in the country. So does Jihad, Hamas, the Sikh militant groups in India—all have a presence in Canada. So does the Kurdistan Workers Party, better known by the acronym PKK, Hezbollah, Colombian rebels and Armed Islamic Group of Algeria. "With perhaps the singular exception of the United States," Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) Director Ward Elcock testified in 1998, "there are more international terrorist groups active here than any other country in the world."

While federal politicians in Ottawa go to great lengths to deny that Canada is a terrorist "safe haven", the problem is spelled out in stacks of Federal Court case files, immigration and refugee files, CSIS reports, RCMP intelligence briefs, Security Intelligence Review Committee reports and records from criminal prosecutions in other jurisdictions, notably France and the US.

Perhaps most convincing are the admissions of terrorists themselves, who have confessed—even bragged—of using Canada as a base for violence abroad, but also to plotting attacks within Canada. When these fragments of intelligence are pieced together, they form a window into the frightening terrorist underworld that operates within this country.

How do they get here? The pattern is almost always the same. They arrive at a major airport bearing false documentation, make a refugee claim and they are off. They often work out of apartments that serve as safe houses, a technique described in an Al-Qaeda training manual found in Britain. The manual describes how these so-called bases are used to launch missions, collect information and observe authorities.

Even when everything works as it should and they are eventually caught in Canada's security screening system, that doesn't mean they have to leave. They simply get an immigration lawyer and start making court appeals. Manickavasagam Suresh, a leader of the Tamil Tigers who was sent here to fundraise, has been appealing his case for seven years, and now the Supreme Court of Canada has given him another shot—this time on the grounds he might be tortured if he is sent back to Sri Lanka.

What are the terrorists doing here? Most common in Canada are terrorist-bureaucrats, those involved in support activity, mundane but nonetheless crucial, that feeds the larger international organization. That includes:

1. The theft and doctoring of passports: A radical Islamic cell based in Montreal, made up of Algerian and Moroccan refugees specialized in this. They forged passports and shipped them overseas to Islamic terrorists so they could move freely. The French prosecutor who successfully convicted them said "You can hijack a plane with a cutter but you need false documents to get on the plane."

2. Political lobbying and pressure: Terrorists represent causes that are yearning for recognition. Violent campaigns are usually accompanied by political campaigns, as we saw in Afghanistan where Ben Laden released a series of videos in which he rambled about the things that bugged him. Just as terrorist organizations make use of agents in countries such as Canada not carry out attacks, they also rely on them to spread the word.

The Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad get this kind of support partly from Internet sites, and several of them were set up in Canada. These sites post recruiting bulletins, messages taking credit for violent attacks and threats. Another aspect of this lobbying are the pressure campaigns these organizations orchestrate against Canadians who they feel threaten their cause.

I have had my own experience with these pressure campaigns. After writing about a particular radical Islamic website, I received 6,000 emails, some of them containing overt death threats.¹

3. Fundraising: Canada is the land of opportunity for terrorists seeking money to finance their campaigns. There are lots of jobs, welfare. Its easy enough to set up a charity, dedicated to some worthy humanitarian cause and start laundering the money for terrorist causes. Until a few weeks ago, it was also perfectly legal to collect money for a terrorist group. Money raised in Canada is bankrolling political and religious violence worldwide.

The money is raised in two fashions: first, through the open collection of money, usually by front organizations. The Tamil Tigers raise millions in Toronto, according to CSIS, through a series of related front groups that purport to be collecting for medical relief but that actually send the money to an agent who uses it to buy weapons.

¹ Here are excerpts of my favorites:

A Mr. Mohammed Affan wrote: “Go to hell Mr. Pig.” Mr. Almasry continued the animal theme, writing: “S. Bell is donkey.”

This one begins “hey bitch.”

This one begins politely. “Hi, how are you, are you good.” Then it digresses. “Please don’t write like this or I will fuck your mother, father, brothers and all you know.” For some reason, he does not mention my sister. You can draw your own conclusions.

Here’s another. Its addressed to “Stewart arse hole ... Hey racist pest ... you should remember you are your shitty arse holes also migrated to Canada like the Tamils. Canada is not your native land. It ends: “Get lost child fucker.”

This is my absolute favorite. “You’re the worst writer that we haven’t see in world. Take that stupid yahoodit.” Then there is some foreign words, in Arabic, I think, and it continues “That mean in your stupid language that I kill you if I find you.” Which only goes to show that while they may be teaching a lot of subjects at those Afghan terrorist training camps, grammar is not among them.

The point it, these letters were not random. They were part of an orchestrated campaign with a clear purpose: to silence those who challenge their violent cause. And by the way, it didn’t work.

The money is collected at LTTE rallies, held at schools and temples. At these rallies, speakers (many of them visitors from abroad, allowed into the country by our immigration department) work up the audience and a box is passed around wrapped in the red and yellow LTTE flag.

Some give voluntarily, others out of fear for their own safety or that of their relatives still in the old country. Those who do not donate are labeled traitors and may find their homes vandalized. They may get threatening phone calls, or damaging lies will be written about them in the ethnic press.

This fundraising causes tremendous carnage.

In the mid-1990s, the Tigers bought a huge shipment of explosives that were used in 1997 to bomb a busy downtown office building in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo. Almost 100 people were killed, all civilians. Two of them were visiting Canadians. A retired CSIS agent recently confirmed that the money that bought the explosives was traced to Toronto.

The other type of fundraising is the criminal kind.

When police were investigating crime they used to be fairly certain that the motive was greed, pure and simple. Now they are finding that the money trail leads increasingly to some foreign terrorist group. This was the case with drug trafficking in Vancouver in the early 1990s, some of which turned out to be a form of narco-terrorism, motivated by the fight for an independent Sikh homeland in India. In Toronto, gangs affiliated with the Tamil Tigers are behind a vast array of crime, from extortion to drug running and murder.

The Lebanese Hezbollah has been profiting for years from car theft in Canada. Luxury cars are stolen in Ontario and Quebec, and then shipped overseas for resale in East Europe or elsewhere. Ten percent of the proceeds of these car rings fund Hezbollah, the RCMP says. In other cases, luxury cars are shipped to the Middle East for the use of terrorists. High-ranking Hezbollah leaders are said to be driving cars stolen in Quebec.

Terrorist groups also use Canada for:

- Purchasing material. In the US, the FBI broke up a Hezbollah cell that was smuggling cigarettes and shipping the proceeds to an agent in Vancouver, who would buy equipment such as night vision goggles and send it to Lebanon by courier.
- As a hiding place, both before and after attacks. Ahmed Ressam lived quietly in Montreal until he set off to bomb the Los Angeles International airport. A man believed to have been involved in the bombing of the Al-Khobar towers building in Saudi Arabia, an attack that killed several US servicemen, was later found in Ottawa, where he was studying.
- As a source of recruits. Documents found in an Al-Qaeda safehouse in Kabul following the retreat of the Taliban included lists of recruits in various countries including Canada. Most frightening is what CSIS describes as a trend toward using Canada as a staging ground for attacks. This was the case 17 years ago with the Air India bombing, which killed 329 people. But it was also the case with Ahmed Ressam, who built a bomb in a Vancouver motel room intending to cause massive casualties in Los Angeles.

No terrorists here? I think not.

What is the impact of this made-in-Canada terrorism?

For one, it causes severe problems for Canadians within Canada, especially in refugee communities where extremists have seized control of community institutions. Refugees come to Canada to start a new life—and then find themselves still under the thumb of the same radicals that forced them to leave their homelands.

Second, it creates threats for Canadians traveling abroad.

Third, it causes problems for Canada's foreign policy. Canada risks being isolated and perhaps even punished for its inaction on terrorism. If we do not take care of the terrorists on our soil, someone else will.

Finally, it causes problems for our friends and allies, who must live with the deadly consequences of our actions and inactions. Money raised in Canada has financed murderous acts abroad. Attacks have been planned in Canada. Canada's failure to disrupt the terrorists on its soil has

resulted in major security problems for Canada's neighbours and some of its closest allies. Canadian-based terrorists have been arrested in the US, Britain, France, Jordan, Algeria, Pakistan, Azerbaijan and other nations.

Following the September 11 attacks, when George W. Bush went on television and said that the US would hold responsible not only the terrorists but the nations who harbour and coddle them, Ottawa must have been terrified. Because for years we have been the Western world's version of Afghanistan.

Canada may not be the only nation that has been negligent on this front, but a country that accepts so many refugees from so many war-affected countries should have the toughest counter-terrorism laws in the world. Instead, we have had the softest such laws. In fact, until a few weeks ago, we had no counter-terrorism laws. Canada harbours far more terrorists than it should. Every major terrorist group in the world has representatives in Canada, and some of them have infiltrated national institutions and politics. As a result, even as it has sought to portray itself as tough on terrorism, Canada's international reputation suffered, as it has become seen increasingly as a source of terrorism.

4. A policy of denial: In face of the terrorist threat of the post-Cold War period, the Government's response has been to deny. The Government's favorite line is that there is no evidence indicating any of the 19 hijackers came from Canada.

I say, so what? That is not the point. Al-Qaeda is not 19 people. It is 10,000 trained militants. It is a global international organization dedicated to murder and martyrdom in the name of Islam. And it has been working in Canada for years. Canadian-based cells, such as the Groupe Fateh Kamel in Montreal, have been shipping money and bogus passports to Al-Qaeda members. The support that has come from Canada has helped feed Al-Qaeda, giving it the resources it has needed to carry out attacks such as September 11.

The Government has been warned about the Canadian activities of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist factions for years, and it has chosen to do nothing. Whenever terrorist issues were raised in the House of Commons, how did the Government respond? But howling racism. It was un-canadian and anti-immigrant to suggest that national security needed tightening, the MP told us.

The Government delayed and avoided and denied, even after Air India, even after Ahmed Ressam. Public outrage over the September 11 attacks and lobbying by Washington forced the Government to at last pass antiterrorism legislation banning fundraising and outlawing violence committed in the furtherance of religion and politics. But why did it take so long? The US did so in 1996, Britain in 2000. These laws did not prevent the attacks in New York and Washington, but they may well have prevented others, and they appear to have at least mitigated the damage. At least the US and Britain acknowledged the threat and were doing what they could. Faced with the same threats and warnings, Canada's parliamentarians did nothing and to that extent they shoulder a share of responsibility for the September 11 attacks.

Whether the new laws passed in Parliament will be effective remains to be seen, but Ottawa is now so late into the game that terrorist organizations are so well-entrenched, so deeply embedded into Canadian society, that ridding them from the country may well be impossible.