FOREIGN FIGHTERS: A REVIEW OF RECENT FINDINGS THROUGH A CANADIAN LENS

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ABSTRACT

The terrorism threat to Canada is understood to be low in terms of direct attack, but the history of terrorism in Canada and the use of Canada as a base to support terrorist activities illustrates the diversity of the threat and the problem of terrorism. Developments in 2012 and 2013 suggest Canadian terrorism has a foreign fighter dimension and recent research on "foreign fighters" is summarised here to tease out some potential implications for Canadian counter-terrorism efforts and the need for a richer and more complete understanding of the scale and scope of the terrorism problem Canada faces.

RÉSUMÉ

La menace terroriste envers le Canada est considérée comme étant faible pour ce qui en est d'une attaque terroriste directe; cependant, l'histoire du terrorisme au Canada et l'utilisation du Canada comme base de soutien aux activités terroristes témoignent de la diversité de la menace et du problème du terrorisme. Des évènements s'étant produits en 2012 et 2013 suggèrent que le terrorisme au Canada comporte une dimension de « militant étranger » ; cet article propose un résumé de quelques recherches récentes sur ce genre de terrorisme et sur ses implications sur les efforts de lutte contre le terrorisme au Canada et sur le besoin d'acquérir une compréhension plus complète de l'importance et de l'étendue du problème du terrorisme auquel fait face le Canada.

In December 2012 the *Global Terrorism Index* (GTI) released its 2011 report and ranked Canada as 74th out of 158 states, thus placing Canada in the "low" category based on the number of incidents, fatalities, injuries and property damage. The data, and the methodology that is intended to result in a score that "indicates the impact of a terrorist attack on a society in terms of the fear and subsequent security response"[1] suggests Canada faces a threat of terrorism, but that the threat, and the impact of it, is low.

The claim that Canada faces a low threat from terrorism is not incongruent with other observations. Indeed, the release of the Government's Counter-terrorism Strategy in February 2012 — *Building Resilience Against Terrorism*[2] — avoids strident language and focuses on the diverse nature of the threat and that Canada is not immune from attack. Despite not having suffered a systematic terrorist campaign, Canada has a long history of terrorism.[3] In fact, our history of terrorism demonstrates unequivocally the diversity of the threat and that Canada is periodically targeted. Canada often has to deal with "Other People's Wars"[4]; moreover, outliers can be extremely destructive: viz. the bombing of Air Flight 182 in 1985. Multicultural societies must thus be attuned to "other people's wars" and the potential for terrorism, or support to terrorist activity that can emerge from violent conflicts in seemingly faraway places. However, the last decade has also produced a new kind of terrorist threat to Canada: the phenomenon of "homegrown" terrorism and the radicalization to violence of individuals seemingly assimilated into Canada purposefully targeting Canada. Indeed, the latest annual public report of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) notes that the "threat of 'home-grown' extremism is of paramount concern to Canadian national security."[5] The best known cases are those tied to the 11 convictions and guilty pleas under the Toronto-18 arrests (2006).

A further dimension of the threat has an international component, albeit with a national connection; namely suspected terrorist activity by Canadians abroad. This is the foreign fighter.[6] Testimony in 2012 noted that between 45 to 60 individuals have left Canada suspected of having

the intention of joining an on-going campaign. Two recent events, the Bulgarian bus bombing in 2012 and the Algerian natural gas facility attack in January 2013 indicate Canadians, or individuals with Canadian passports, were involved in both attacks.[7] Individuals have been arrested prior to departure to other states and at least one Canadian is understood to have been killed in Somalia fighting for Al Shabaad.[8] Understanding the "Muslim Foreign Fighter" appears to be of increasing relevance to Canadian counter-terrorism policies.

THE FOREIGN FIGHTER

Does the labelling of a discrete type of violent actor represent anything more than a further parsing of "terrorist" or an additional blurring of the actors within the spectrum of violence that encompasses civil wars, insurgency, transnational terrorism, terrorism and political violence? Disaggregating the terrorist threat is of significant importance in a counter-terrorism context. Burke's categorization of the "the 9/11 Wars" is a useful method?[9] In his attempt to analyse the various conflicts which flowed from September 11, 2001, Burke labelled them "the 9/11 Wars" indicating that these "can only be understood as part of a matrix of ongoing, overlaid, interlinked and overlapping conflicts" that have their origins in local, regional, and international events as well as contemporary and historical temporal frames.[10] At the local level, Burke argued the conflicts were "a mass of private battles, fratricidal skirmishes, communal clashes" whereas the national level was about group identity and political power; at the final, international level, Burke suggested that the conflicts could, but not necessarily should, "be integrated into an overarching cosmic conflict pitting the West and its allies against radical Islam."[11] Each level offered a different lens or prism on the conflict, but the "generalizations, with their easy assumptions and seductive simplicity, at best highlighted only one element of the overall conflict, and at worst obscured and distorted the nature of the phenomenon they supposedly described."[12] There are few reasons to contest the claim that the 9/11 wars had multiple levels; indeed, lessons for Afghanistan and Iraq indicate clearly the requirement to understand the interaction between local, national, and international dimensions of the conflicts. Generalizations and assumptions have also obscured terrorism and the study of terrorism, terrorist groups, and individuals active in terrorism:[13] as Hegghammer notes with regret "the view that radical Islamists are all the same has proved remarkably resilient"[14] despite considerable empirical research to the contrary[15] and increasing knowledge of the diversity of radicalization processes.[16]

Over the last decade Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism – by which I mean terrorism inspired by the narrative and/or activities of Al-Qaeda — has been broadly defined into groups that compose: first, an Al-Qaeda core presumed to be based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region; second, Al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb; and, third, Al-Qaeda-inspired groups, cells, and individuals that have no formal ties or contact with Al-Qaeda core.[17] The last of these categorizations fit under the "homegrown" terrorist. Canadians going abroad to conduct violence, and evidence of Canadians conducting acts of terrorism overseas, is one more area of concern. A related issue is that foreign fighters will conduct, or organize, acts of terrorism within Canada upon their return.

Data on individuals known to have travelled abroad to take part in a terrorism is sketchy, but Hegghammer has attempted to collate such data.[18] He estimates that foreign fighters leaving the United States, Western Europe, Australia and Canada between 1990 and 2010 to fight abroad outnumber individuals from western democracies seeking to conduct terrorism at home by a ratio of four to one: 258 domestic terrorists and 900 foreign fighters. When the 2001 to 2010 period is assessed in isolation, the ratio approaches three to one. If correct the homegrown terrorism problem is smaller than the foreign fighter problem. Of course, homegrown terrorism threats are direct threats and justifiably more resources and effort are allocated to counter it. Nevertheless the observation has significant counter-terrorism implications since, as Hegghammer notes, "when Western jihadists first considered using violence they were… more likely to join a distant warzone than attack at home."[19]

In speculating why this is so, he suggests: (1) more opportunities exist abroad than at home, not least because attacks at home have become increasingly difficult and, even if successful, are often single events due to arrest or death; (2) travelling abroad might be more attractive in terms of training and experience; and, (3) norms against attacking the homeland exist: foreign fighting is perceived as legitimate whereas domestic attacks are viewed as illegitimate.[20] Hegghammer himself recognizes that the normative constraints against attacking the homeland appear to have weakened since 1998 and he concludes that the constraints have weakened because foreign fighting has become more difficult over time and domestic terrorism has been encouraged by an increasing number of ideologues.[21]

Do foreign fighters return? The data indicate only one in nine foreign fighters come home to perpetrate attacks. The impact of these individuals — the "veteran effect" — however appears to be significant in terms of

attack planning, of the ability to radicalize those around them, the ability to bring the attack to fruition, and the lethality of such attacks if perpetrated. Thus, one of the conclusions reached is that "Western jihadists may not all be equally motivated to attack in the West. In fact, the tentative data presented here indicate that most prefer to fight outside the West and that most foreign fighters do not 'come home to roost.' However, the data also point to a veteran effect that makes returnees significantly more effective operatives." [22] Even allowing for the tentative nature of the data, responding to the foreign fighter problem should not be based on empirically unfounded assumptions or generalizations concerning the threat they pose: some data may be better than no data in this respect.[23] It also offers some corroboration and perhaps contextual explanation for why there have been so few homegrown violent extremists.[24]

From a counter-terrorism perspective, portions of Hegghammer's findings are encouraging for Canada: the norm against attacking the homeland is something that can be strengthened and made more resilient; active engagement with communities perceived to be at risk of radicalisation to violence and/or targeted as potential recruiting grounds for violent extremists can reduce risk; efforts to counter the Al-Qaeda narrative may also help; travelling abroad to fight can be made more difficult; and, international efforts to stymie foreign fighters, financial flows, and procurement activities can also be enhanced.

Other aspects of it, and other research, are less encouraging. The degradation of the norm against attacking the homeland is a concern and the ability of the narrative to attract recruits remains powerful. Mendelsohn suggests that foreign fighters are becoming less important in theatres of conflict abroad for a variety of reasons, including concerns about infiltration, capabilities, and local knowledge and experience, but those individuals are being used in non-combat roles: as potential returnees to conduct terrorism at home; as potential recruiters; and as media and communication experts to target diasporas at home.[25] As with radicalization to violence, the foreign fighter '"problem' is actually several problems that should be disaggregated for designing effective policies. Kaplan proposes that we divide the fighter's 'life cycle' into the pre-war mobilization phase, the war stage, and the post-war period." [26] In essence, it all points to requiring a deeper understanding of the terrorism problem.

What then might all this mean for Canada? If Canada previously imported terrorism in the form of "other people's wars," then the foreign fighter problem suggests Canada also exports terrorists to conflict abroad. That is, of course, not a new phenomenon, but the nature of the threat indicates the dense web of transnational counter-terrorism mechanisms will have to remain in place for the foreseeable future. Moreover, it may, as Hegghammer argues, be time to "consider abandoning the fuzzy term 'homegrown terrorism' and accurately differentiate terrorist violence domestically and abroad." [27]

NOTES

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[5] Canadian Security Intelligence Service, '2010-2011 Public Report'.

[6] David Malet, 'Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions' *Orbis* [2010]: 97-114; Thomas Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad' *International Security*, 35(3) (Winter 2010/11): 53-94; Barak Mendelsohn, 'Foreign Fighters — Recent Trends' *Orbis* [2011]: 189-202.

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[9] Jason Burke, 'The 9/11 Wars' (London; Allen Lane; 2011).

[10] Burke: 495-496.

[11] *Ibid*.: 496.

[12] *Ibid*.

[13] Michael Stohl, 'Don't confuse me with the facts: knowledge claims and terrorism' *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. [2012], 5(1): 31-49.

[14] Thomas Hegghammer, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting' *American Political Science Review* (forthcoming in print) available online [February 2013]: 13.

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[19] Hegghammer [2013]: 6.

[20] Hegghammer [2013]: 6-13.

[21] Hegghammer [2013]: 9.

[22] Hegghammer [2013]: 12.

[23] Hegghammer [2013]: 13.

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[25] Mendelsohn [2011].

[26] Mendelsohn [2011]: 202.

[27] Hegghammer [2013]: 13.