# IS THERE A TERRORIST THREAT TO CANADA FROM SYRIAN REFUGEES?

**Amarnath Amarasingam** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, and co-directs a study of Western foreign fighters at the University of Waterloo. He is the author of *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Sri Lankan Tamil Activism in Canada* (2015). His works in terrorism, diaspora politics, post-war reconstruction, and the sociology of religion, and has conducted field research in Morocco, Turkey, Somalia, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and Israel/Palestine. He has published several peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, has presented at 100 national and international conferences, and has written for The New York Times, Politico, The Atlantic, and Foreign Affairs.

**The public conversation around Syrian refugees in Canada has been heavily securitized partly due to the frequency of ISIS-inspired attacks in the West. The assumption has been that, first, Syrian refugees, due to the trauma of dislocation are somehow unique vulnerable to radicalization and, second, that ISIS is determined to infiltrate the refugee flows in order to send hardened fighters to Western countries to launch attacks. This article examines the evidence around these two assumptions and argues that, particularly for Canadians, these fears are unfounded.**

***La conversation publique autour des réfugiés syriens au Canada a été fortement orientée vers les questions de sécurité, en partie à cause de la fréquence des attaques inspirées par l'EI dans l'Ouest. L'hypothèse est que, d'une part, les réfugiés syriens, en raison du traumatisme causé par la dislocation, sont vulnérables à la radicalisation et, d'autre part, que l'EI est déterminé à infiltrer les flux de réfugiés pour envoyer des combattants endurcis aux pays occidentaux. Cet article examine la preuve entourant ces deux hypothèses et fait valoir que, particulièrement pour les Canadiens, ces craintes ne sont pas fondées.***

On 19 September 2016, two months before the American election, the candidate Donald Trump's son tweeted a picture that caused an uproar on social media. It said: "If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you, would you take a handful?" with an accompanying graphic stating, "That's our Syrian refugee problem." The tweet was roundly criticized for its insensitivity as well as the bizarre comparison of human beings to candy. Shortly after the ISIS-inspired terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California, candidate Donald Trump released a proposal calling for the "complete shutdown" of Muslim immigration into the United States until we "can figure out what is going on." Since then, he became President and issued Executive Orders banning people from largely Muslim countries.

The fear of terrorism and refugees is not confined to the Trump family. An Ipsos poll conducted in July 2017 showed that 51% of Canadians believe that terrorists pretending to be refugees will enter Canada to cause violence and destruction.[1] A Pew Research poll a month later was more comforting, but

1 Russell, Andrew and Ryan Rocca. 2017. "Canadians are Concerned Refugees Pose a Terror Threat: Should They Be Worried?" *Global News*. July 6. Available at: http://globalnews.ca/news/3568629/canadians-are-concerned-refugees-pose-a-terror-threat-should-they-be-worried

still showed that 25% of Canadians believe that "large numbers of refugees leaving countries such as Iraq and Syria" was a major threat to their country.[2]

While poll numbers often produce more questions than answers, it seems clear that large numbers of Canadians, aware of the threat posed by groups like the Islamic State and its ability to inspire individuals to launch attacks on its behalf, are uneasy about letting people into the country from the very same conflict zone. The fear seems to stem from assumptions around two separate phenomena. The first is the assumption that refugees, particularly young men, are somehow uniquely prone and vulnerable to radicalization and extremist violence. The second is that the Islamic State is committed to making full use of the routes and pathways employed by asylum seekers moving out of Syria and Iraq.

These assumptions are based on several mistaken ideas about not only the nature of refugees but also the process of radicalization. The view that asylum seekers are particularly prone to radicalization assumes that they are socio-economically downtrodden, uneducated, and traumatized and that these factors naturally contribute to radicalization. The Syrian and Iraqi refugee population, rather, have been remarkably diverse — made up of males and females, and individuals from a variety of socio-economic and class backgrounds. The civil war in Syria and the Bashar al-Assad regime's indiscriminate targeting of civilians has turned millions of people from all walks of life into refugees and an overwhelming number of them are children and youth. Decades of research on terrorism, moreover, shows no evidence that any single group is uniquely prone to radicalization and terrorism based on their socio-economic background. This is something scholars of terrorism never tire of pointing out: there is no typical profile of someone who radicalizes to violence.[3]

The argument that refugees are inherently prone to terrorism and violence seems to stem from some cases in Europe. Riaz Khan Ahmadzai, the July 2016 Wurzburg train attacker for instance, was a Pakistani asylum seeker in Germany.[4] Mohammad Daleel, who perpetrated the Ansbach bombing in July 2016, was a Syrian asylum seeker who had his claim rejected.[5] The Berlin Christmas market attacker, Anis Amri, traveled from Tunisa to Italy and eventually was denied asylum in Germany.[6] Rakhmat Akilov, who was behind the April 2017 Stockholm attack, was also a rejected asylum seeker.[7] While some may argue that these cases vindicate Donald Trump Jr.'s Skittles analogy, the opposite is actually true.

None of these attackers were legitimate refugees; they all had their claims studied and rejected for a variety of reasons. In theory, anyone can enter a refugee-accepting country and seek asylum. It is the receiving country which decides if this claim is legitimate and eventually grants refugee status. In other words, the cases above are instances where the asylum system actually worked, even if law enforcement and border services were not able to subsequently detect and foil plots.

While I argue that a generalized fear of asylum seekers is unwarranted, there is an important security threat arising from how the Islamic State has sought to influence and direct attacks outside of Syria and Iraq. There is evidence emerging that ISIS is very much committed to using refugee flows, smugglers, fake passports and the like, to funnel operatives into Europe and North America. Early evidence of this emerged after the brutal attacks in Paris in November 2015, when ISIS operatives launched attacks on a series of locations, killing 130 and injuring more than 300. After the attacks, two Syrian passports were found near the bodies of the attackers under the names Ahmad Almohammad and Mohammad al-Mahmod.[8] Things only got more bizarre as time went on: German intelligence has noted that ISIS is training its fighters to act like asylum seekers and has been teaching them how to pass asylum interviews.[9]

---

2 Poushter, Jacob and Dorothy Manevich. 2017. Globally, People Point to ISIS and Climate Change as Leading Security Threats." *Pew Research Center*. August 1. Available at: http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/01/globally-people-point-to-isis-and-climate-change-as-leading-security-threats

3 Dawson, Lorne and Amarnath Amarasingam. 2016. "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40.3: 191-210.

4 Shuster, Simon. 2016. "Why Germany Can't Figure Out the Identity of its First ISIS Attacker." *Time.com*. July 20. Available at: http://time.com/4415501/germany-isis-ax-train-attack-terrorism

5 Eddy, Melissa and Boryana Dzhambazova. 2016. "How a Suicide Bomber Made His Way From Syria to Strike in Ansbach, Germany." *The New York Times*. August 4. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/05/world/europe/germany-refugees-terrorism.html

6 Connolly, Kate and Chris Stephens. 2016. "Berlin Attack Suspect Anis Amri Had Been on Watchlist Since January." *The Guardian*. December 21. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/21/berlin-attack-suspect-anis-amri-under-monitoring-since-january

7 BBC News. 2017. "Stockholm Attack: Who is Suspect Rakhmat Akilov?" BBC News. April 10. Available at: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39552691

8 Lichfield, John. 2015. "Paris Attacks: Ahmed Almuhamed's passport may have been planted by terrorists." The Independent. November 15. Available at: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/paris-terror-attacks-ahmed-almuhameds-passport-may-have-been-planted-by-terrorists-a6735476.html

9 Flade, Florian. 2017. "IS-Liste mit 173 potenziellen Selbstmordattentätern aufgetaucht." Welt. March 8. Available at: www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article167322980/IS-Liste-mit-173-potenziellen-Selbstmordattentaetern-aufgetaucht.html

In July 2017, Interpol circulated a list of 173 ISIS fighters that were purportedly being trained and sent to launch attacks in Europe.[10] When colleagues and I looked at the list, we were expecting them to be mostly western foreign fighters returning or radicalized youth born in Europe. But, the opposite was the case: 132 of the 173 individuals were Iraqis, and many of them were quite young. Experts began to suspect that this was intentional. Western fighters would be much more difficult to sneak back into Europe, as they would already be well-known to European law enforcement officials. Iraqis, on the other hand, would not be known to law enforcement, would not have any fingerprints or biometric data registered in European countries, and could much more easily blend into the refugee flows. While these theories are not completely verified, it seems to fit with the Islamic State's stated objective to launch more attacks in the West.

In essence, a blanket ban on asylum seekers from Syria and Iraq, such as that pursued by President Trump in his Executive orders, would be cruel to the millions of people fleeing indiscriminate shelling and chemical attacks from the Assad regime and its supporters. While Canada is not immune to terrorist attacks, the country has experienced less of them compared to European counterparts, and Canada has also exported fewer numbers of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq. This is the case even as the country has accepted thousands of refugees, from a variety of backgrounds, over the last several decades. This is because Canada handpicks the refugees it wants and is not land-locked with countries that are experiencing protracted conflict. The country should remain vigilant, but not overreact. It should pursue its national security objectives, but, above all, should not sacrifice its humanitarian values.

10 Flade, Florian. 2016. "Deutschland droht mit Alleingang bei Grenzkontrollen". Welt. October 12. Available at: www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article160177393/Deutschland-droht-mit-Alleingang-bei-Grenzkontrollen.html