HATE, EXTREMISM, AND TERRORISM

In Alberta, Canada, and Beyond

The Shift from 2019 to 2022

III. Religiously-Motivated Violent Extremism

Michele St-Amant, David Jones,
Michael King, & John McCoy

organization for the prevention of violence

RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED VIOLENT EXTREMISM (RMVE)

INTRODUCTION

Religiously motivated violent extremism (RMVE) is the term used by the Canadian federal government to refer to a set of grievances that encourages violence in a "spiritual struggle against a perceived immoral system."[1] RMVE actors can only address this struggle through the act of violence.[2]

According to the CSIS Public Reports for 2020 and 2021, the threat from RMVE actors in Canada comes primarily from individuals acting alone and drawing inspiration from two groups in particular – Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), otherwise known as Daesh.

While Al Qaeda and Daesh represent the focus of national security agencies, it is important to recognize the diverse forms of RMVE that have global and local impacts.. RMVE actors have adopted movements that cross through multiple faiths – such as millenarianism and apocalypticism and have drawn on texts and scriptures from global religions including Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism.

For example, the violent extremist elements among the Christian Identity movement and violent anti-abortion activists and groups like the Army of God have historically posed a threat in North America, particularly in the United States. Several contemporary IMVE groups incorporate religious symbols, principles, and concepts into their ideology, although some, like the Order of Nine Angles, do not conceive of themselves as explicitly religious.

Additionally, as was the case with the Poway synagogue shooter, several lone actor extremists have framed their actions as, in part, religiously justified. While the re-emergence of a virulent form of religiously justified xenophobic extremism is worth tracking, in the interest of analytic clarity, this report's discussion of these trends is contained within the IMVE section. It thus adheres to categories used by the Government of Canada.

In other parts of the world, such as in South Asia, tensions between diaspora movements that meld religious, nationalistic, and ethnic-based ideologies have resulted in several violent extremist events, such as the 2019 Pulwama attack in India.

Categorizing these disparate movements that prioritize, for example, nationalistic and xenophobic belief systems while employing religious iconography, justifications, and dogma can be challenging. While each of these groups and movements poses a potential threat to public safety, this section will focus on the threat from Al Qaeda and Daesh, as these two groups represent the locus of discussion around RMVE and national security and the bulk of activity witnessed in Canada in recent years.

Much of this activity, primarily since 2014, has been related to the recruitment and travel of foreign fighters to Syria, Iraq, and other conflict zones in the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa.

THREATS TO CANADA AND ALBERTA

According to both Public Safety Canada's 2018 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service's (CSIS) 2020 Public Report, the primary domestic threat related to Religiously Motivated Extremism, particularly Al Qaeda and its affiliated splinter groups (AQAS), continues to be from individuals inspired by these groups using low-tech, high-impact terrorist attacks which can be "planned and executed swiftly with little warning."[3]

Specifically, these attacks are likely to be inspired — rather than specifically directed— by these groups, with a preference for "soft" targets such as crowds in public spaces.[4] While the threat in Canada never reached the levels seen within Western Europe over the last 20 years, there are still several notable cases from within Canada since the OPV's last report demonstrating the threat is both present and persistent.

In February 2020, a Toronto woman became the first Canadian killed due to terrorism within Canada since October 2014. Although the attack was initially not labeled a terrorist incident, new evidence increased the charge to "murder-terrorist activity."[5]

In August 2021, the attacker was sentenced to life in prison with no eligibility for parole for 25 years and admitted in an agreed statement of facts that following the attack, he placed a note next to the woman's body with a popular Daesh slogan, "Islamic State Baquiya."[6] He also had a note in his bag which read "This is for the Islamic State, & all the crimes against Muslims."[i]

This case is notable in two ways. First, it demonstrates the persistence of the threat of Daesh-inspired terrorism in the West. Even though the group is significantly diminished, it retains inspirational power amongst its global supporters.

Second, the initial uncertainty around the attack's links to terrorism indicates what has been the norm for Al Qaeda and Daesh-inspired attacks in the West for several years – a reliance on lone actors – which can, in some cases, be difficult for law enforcement to initially link to AQAS.

Another notable recent case was the arrest of a youth in Kingston, Ontario, in January 2019 for terrorism offences.[7] Following his arrest, police found bomb-making and preparation materials in his bedroom, including diagrams of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). What was unique about this case was the involvement of a remote planner based in Syria, who the youth was referred to after inquiring about how to make IEDs on a pro-Daesh online forum.

Despite its considerable territorial losses in Iraq and Syria over the past few years, Daesh still maintains some capacity to communicate with and help supporters conduct attacks in the West.

The Syrian-based attack planner also helped the Kingston youth make contact online with what they believed to be an aspiring lone attacker in the U.S. but was, in fact, a confidential informant for the FBI. The informant then alerted the RCMP - culminating in an extensive, cross-border investigation.

This plot demonstrates that western Daesh supporters and their attack planners are still actively networking across national boundaries and seeking support to carry out attacks.

i "This is for the Islamic State, & all the crimes against Muslims. God is great!"

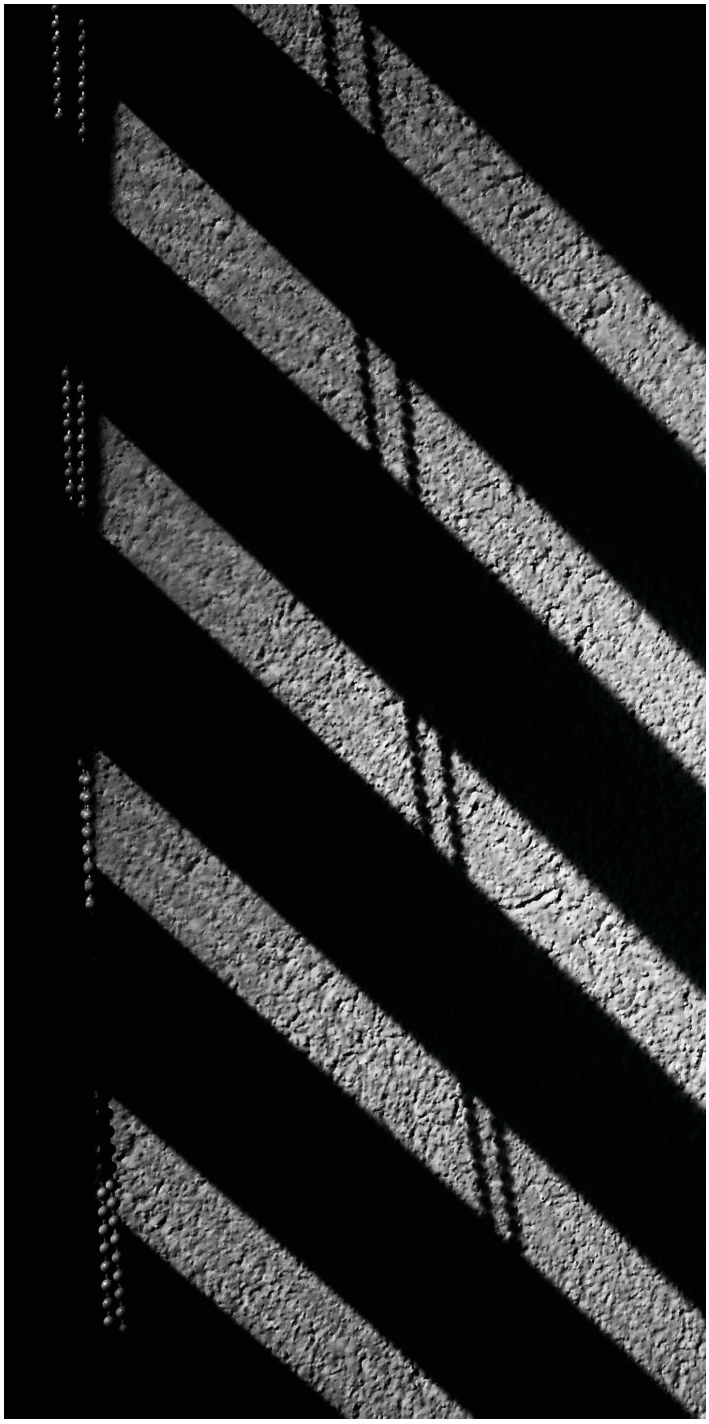
In Alberta, the threat of AQAS-linked attacks was never particularly high. In general, most AQAS-linked activities were driven by several individuals who traveled to or returned from fighting abroad.

Most law enforcement officials we interviewed in the province said there was no evidence of any AQAS-linked activity in their area. However, one law enforcement official noted that although the threat is low, there remain those who espouse RMVE but lack any formal connections to the groups:

> *"We're not seeing any direct ISIS connections. There's always rhetoric, there's always talk around it, but in terms of being able to make concrete connections that we have legitimate ISIS followers, or anybody planning something here, I would say we're unaware of that."*
>
> ***– Law enforcement official***

In general, though, interviewees noted that most RMVE activity in the province has significantly dipped since 2017 and has so far not seen a recovery:

> *"So, the CSIS Act [categories of] Political, Ideological, and Religious [motivated extremism]. If we're looking at all of those cumulatively, since 2017 there probably would have been an increase, but that would have to acknowledge that that's coming off a dip in religious extremism. So, I think there's been a growth in some areas and recession in others."*
>
> ***– Law enforcement official***



AQAS-LINKED CHARGES IN CANADA SINCE OPV'S 2019 REPORT

Perpetrator/Location	Date	Incident	Charges
Teen from Kingston, ON	2019	The Kingston teenager was arrested after RCMP raided his home and found explosive materials and instructions for bomb-making. The RCMP received a tip from an undercover informant working for the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation after the two communicated online about carrying out an attack.	Charged with four terrorism-related offenses, pleaded guilty in summer 2020, and sentenced to three years in 2022.[8]
Couple from the Toronto-area	2019	Attempted to travel together to Turkey and onward to Syria to join Daesh but were taken into custody in Turkey and then deported back to Canada.	Both are charged with 2 counts of terrorism for participating in activities of a terrorist group and leaving Canada to participate in activities of a terrorist group.[9]
Man from the Toronto-area	2019	A convicted al-Qaeda supporter who tried to join Jabhat Al-Nushrah in Syria in 2014 was arrested after his initial release from prison by counterterrorism police, following information he had violated the conditions of his probation by possessing a cellphone with access to the internet.	Violation of parole conditions.[10]
Two cousins from Calgary, AB	2020	Both men are returnees from Syria who joined Daesh in 2013 and returned to Canada in 2014. They were arrested and charged in 2020 after a 7-year probe.	Both faced several counts of terrorism charges, and one cousin faced an additional charge for participation in a kidnapping on behalf of a terrorist group.[11] One of the cousins subsequently pled guilty in 2022 and was sentenced to 12 years in prison.
Man from Burlington, ON	2020	Claimed to have been part of Daesh in Syria in 2014 and was the subject of a popular New York Times podcast, Caliphate.	Charged with perpetrating a terrorism hoax.[12]
Man from Toronto-area	2020	Attacked and killed a woman walking on a sidewalk in Toronto with a hammer.	Charged with first-degree murder for the purpose of terrorism.[13]
Man from Toronto-area	2021	This individual had hundreds of propaganda relating to ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban, attack planning, and bomb-making information.	Placed on a terrorism peace bond for 10 months. [14]

DAESH

Al Qaeda and its affiliates and splinter groups (AQAS), as we in our first report, include various RMVE organizations scattered across the world. However, aside from Al Qaeda's core organization, Daesh – also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – is one of the most infamous of its splinter groups.

Daesh came to the world's attention in the mid-2010s for its gruesome and violent actions in Syria and Iraq during the Syrian Civil War and its ability to usurp and control large swaths of Syrian and Iraqi territory.

Like Al Qaeda, Daesh inspired many Westerners to carry out attacks in the United States, Canada, and Europe; or to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight with Daesh. This became known as the foreign fighter phenomenon, which peaked during the mid-2010s.

Over these years, several Canadians – including a significant number of Albertans – have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq. Many have since died overseas, but several others have returned to Canada or are still either held in detainee camps in Syria or at large abroad.

Although Daesh's operational tempo has slowed significantly since the group lost its final territorial stronghold in Syria in 2019, there are still rare cases of individuals attempting to travel to Syria and Iraq or attempting to carry out attacks in the West inspired by Daesh. Despite this general slowdown, the presences of Daesh or Al Qaeda affiliates around the world – from eastern Afghanistan to Central African Republic -- underscores the persistence of the RMVE threat.

The loss of Daesh's final territorial stronghold in northeastern Syria in March 2019, followed by the death of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in October 2019, has destabilized the group's operations but has not resulted in its total collapse.

Despite these setbacks, Daesh has still been able to maintain both relatively effective operations in Iraq and Syria as well as a network of affiliate groups around the world. For example, Daesh still can carry out a low-level insurgency in rural areas in Iraq and Syria and has some considerable success targeting local government and Kurdish forces.[15]

Outside Iraq and Syria, Daesh affiliates in the Sinai, West Africa, Libya, and Afghanistan continue to exert de facto control over patches of territory. However, the relative autonomy each of these affiliates or provinces enjoys also means that the losses experienced by the core group in Syria and Iraq have had little impact, if any, on the affiliate groups around the world.

The collapse of its sanctuary in Iraq and Syria amplified the struggle Daesh was already facing in its ability to recruit foreign fighters. However, there is evidence that foreign fighters have started to trickle into Daesh's other provinces.

A handful of foreign fighters, including allegedly at least one Canadian, were arrested by Afghan forces following a raid targeting Daesh's Khorasan province in eastern Afghanistan in early 2020.[16] Whether these were new foreign terrorist fighters or remnants from Iraq and Syria remains unclear. Moreover, there are still sporadic reports of westerners trying, and largely failing, to join the group's ranks.

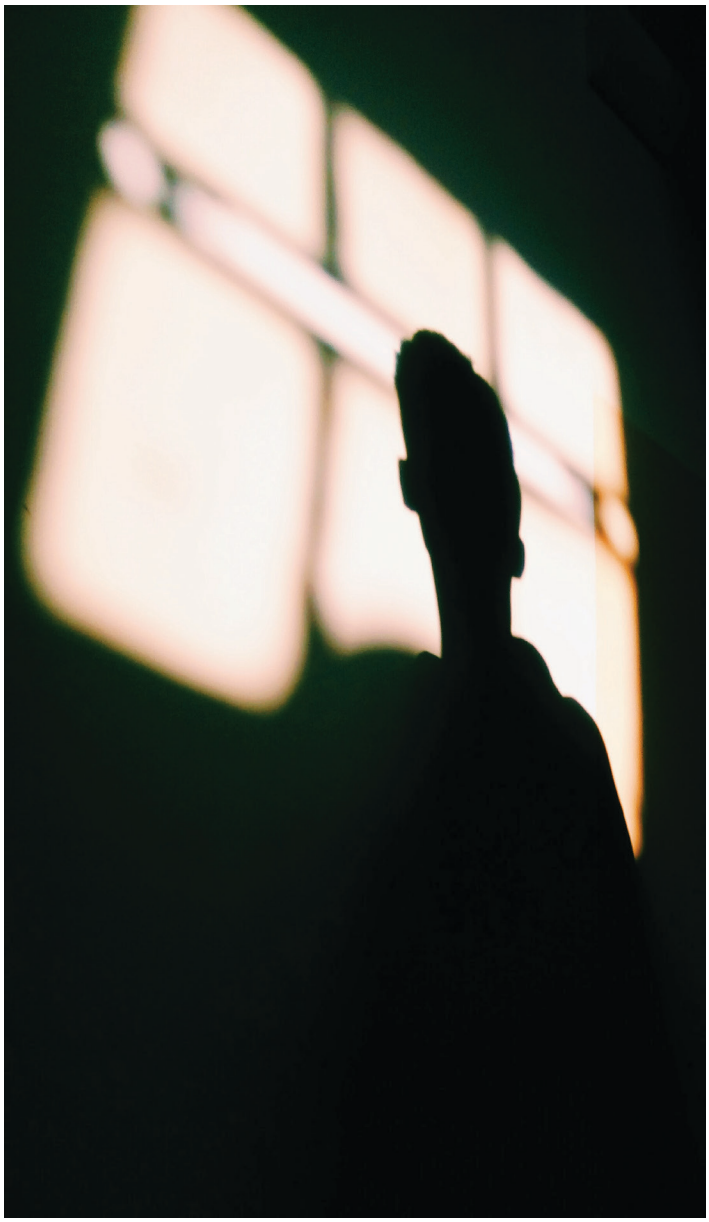
This includes a Toronto-area couple who allegedly attempted to join Daesh in Syria in mid-2019 after traveling to Turkey. They were later apprehended along the Turkish-Syrian border and deported back to Canada.[17] More recently, a man from Quebec was arrested for "suspicious activity" by the Taliban in Afghanistan in January 2022 after crossing into the country from Pakistan.[18] Although Canadian authorities are currently trying to determine the nature of his visit, the Taliban allege that he may have been attempting to join Daesh.

Despite its territorial losses, Daesh demonstrates a persistent ability to inspire or, in some instances, direct violence outside of Syria and Iraq.[19] Though the pace of these attacks is far less than what it was at the peak of the group's power in 2014 and 2015, the lingering capability is evidenced by large attacks like the 2019 Easter Bombing in Sri Lanka and a series of smaller vehicular or stabbing attacks across Western Europe.

Daesh has also attempted to keep itself relevant during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. In a January 2020 issue of its weekly newsletter called Al-Naba, the group lauded the Covid-19 pandemic for the "death and terror" it would inflict on the world.[20] This strategy is in line with previous events; for example, Daesh has also used natural disasters and other world events like mass attacks to suggest that God was inflicting divine retribution on the group's adversaries.

Recently in February of 2022, Daesh was dealt another blow when its leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, killed himself and his family during a U.S. Special Forces raid.[21] However, experts have debated how this will impact Daesh's operating capacity as a group.

Al-Qurayshi had been the leader of Daesh since the group's previous leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed. Unlike al-Baghdadi, al-Quraysi operated in hiding out of fear that he would be killed in the same way as his predecessor; and, unlike al-Baghdadi, who was heavily involved in directing and communicating the activities of Daesh, al-Qurayshi ruled in absentia, delegating to others around him to direct the group.[22] As a result, experts claim that a more hands-on leader could soon fill his role.[23]



AL-QAEDA

While Daesh's spectacular rise in the mid-2010s eclipsed Al Qaeda (AQ) as the primary focus of international counterterrorism activity, AQ still retains a significant operating capability through its affiliate groups in various parts of the world. Since the 2000s, AQ has focused more on regional and local conflicts than on large-scale attacks in Western countries.

While this may be good news for the West and Canada, it poses serious challenges for the countries where AQ and its affiliated groups operate. For example, the AQ-linked umbrella group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM), active in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, has resisted an aggressive counterterrorism campaign by local, European, and American forces for several years.

In East Africa, in addition to carrying out attacks in populated city centers with tragic regularity, Al-Shabaab – an AQ affiliate group – can operate relatively openly in large parts of southern Somalia. Finally, despite public statements to the contrary, the Taliban continue to provide logistical support and sanctuary to AQ members in Afghanistan.

With ongoing crises and political instability in Afghanistan it is unclear whether the Taliban will abide by any of its security assurances it offered the United States in 2020. These assurances were part of peace negotiations, including a promise not to allow the country to harbour international terrorist organizations like AQ.[24]

AQ, like Daesh, has also been dealt significant blows in the form of leadership assassinations. For example, between 2020 and 2022, a number of senior AQ leaders were killed in drone strikes, including Ayman al-Zawahiri – Osama bin Laden's successor and AQ's leader since 2011.[25]

Despite Zawahiri being a less inspirational leader than Bin Laden, the group retains external operations capability and is likely to continue in its efforts to attack western targets, despite its shift toward local conflicts in the MENA and Indian subcontinent.[26]

In the last several years, the highest profile AQ-linked attack in the West was the 2019 shootings at the Pensacola Naval Air Station, where a Saudi air force officer in the U.S. for military training opened fire on the base.

The subsequent investigation revealed that he had sustained contact with members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) until his attack.[27] Additionally, like Daesh, AQ appears to maintain the ability to inspire Western travelers. Recently, an Arizona woman was arrested in July 2020 after attempting to travel to Afghanistan. She also gave prepaid gift cards to an undercover FBI agent to purchase weapons to kill American soldiers.[28]

'RETURNEES' AND CANADIANS DETAINED ABROAD

OPV's 2019 report noted that on a per-capita basis, Albertans (approximately 30 to 40 of whom left to join listed terrorist entities) are overrepresented among Canadians who travelled abroad to join terrorist groups like Al-Shabaab and Daesh.[29] This phenomenon peaked in 2014-2015 after Daesh declared its so-called Caliphate in Syria. Most of these individuals died overseas, and the remainder tend to fit into one of two groups. The first group encompasses individuals who have already returned to Canada, known as 'returnees'; and the second includes those currently detained abroad in Syria.

According to the Canadian government, as of 2019, about 190 people with connections to Canada were suspected of engaging in terrorist activity abroad.[30] About 60 additional individuals had returned to Canada, though this number has remained stable for the last three years.[31]

Since the release of OPV's last report, there have been at least three high profile cases of charges laid against, or investigations of, alleged returnees in Alberta: a woman from Edmonton who is alleged to have been a member of Al-Shabaab; and two cousins from Calgary who joined Daesh in Syria from 2013 to 2014. Together, these cases demonstrate the difficulty Canadian officials face in attempting to uncover, arrest, and prosecute the terrorist activities of Canadians abroad.

In the case of the two cousins from Calgary who were charged with terrorism offences in 2020, the investigation took approximately seven years to gather sufficient evidence.[32] In May 2022, one of the cousins who went to Syria via Turkey in 2013 pleaded guilty to committing terrorist offences abroad and was sentenced to 12 years in prison.[33] The other cousin has been charged, but the case has not yet gone to trial.

Meanwhile, the woman in Edmonton was never charged criminally though her alleged role with Al-Shabaab occurred several years prior and only surfaced following the efforts of a Canadian reporter to track her story.[34] Given the difficulty of collecting evidence for crimes that occurred abroad in conflict zones, these cases are emblematic of the often long and extensive investigations required in order to criminally charge returnees.[35]

The Canadians who remain abroad are a heterogeneous group. While half of the estimated 190 have travelled to Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, the other half are in various countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North and East Africa. In addition, this heterogeneity indicates the potential need for different kinds of approaches should they return to Canada. Most critically, it is necessary to recognize that most Canadians detained in northeastern Syria are children. While the number of Canadians detained has evolved, the most recent and credible accounts suggest that 20 Canadian children, mostly under the age of eight, are currently languishing in the camps.[36]

Subsequently, there are significant concerns related to human rights, child welfare, and victimization of Canadian children around this population, and ongoing debates over their return to Canada. If these children are eventually repatriated, facilitating their re-entry into Canadian society will require substantial support from organizations equipped to help them, as well as their parents or caregivers, to negotiate the complex and likely traumatic experiences and indoctrination they faced abroad.

Children situated in these camps will require developmentally appropriate support upon their return. The OPV's 2020 report, *Community Guide for Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Returnees and Their Children,* outlines important recommendations.

The Government of Canada has indicated that criminal prosecution remains the preferred course of action for others suspected to have engaged in extremist activity abroad if and when they return.[37]

For some returnees – like the two cousins from Calgary – there may be sufficient evidence for the Canadian government to pursue charges. However, for others, criminal prosecution has proven to be difficult, often due to the complications of gathering evidence about their activities in a conflict zone.

When evidence is insufficient, the Government of Canada has indicated several alternative measures to help mitigate the potential threat. while further investigations occur–for example, implementing terrorism peace bonds, conducting physical surveillance, and cancelling or revoking passports.[38] In some cases, whether instead of or in addition to alternative measures, individuals may be channeled towards intervention programs aimed at countering violent extremism (CVE).[39]

In a recent example of these mitigation measures, a terrorism peace bond, which imposes conditions on an individual's freedoms as a result of 'reasonable' fears they will engage in terrorist activities, was considered for a Calgary woman who had previously been held in a detention camp in Syria and returned to the province in November of 2021.[40] This individual had sworn in an affidavit that she had tried several times to leave Syria but was prevented from doing so by Daesh. She also provided information to the FBI about Daesh suspects.[41] Upon her return, she was reunited with her five-year-old daughter, who had left Syria in March 2021 with the woman's sister and an American diplomat.

There is also evidence from the current returnees, including the woman from Calgary, that the threat level they pose is highly variable. For example, there is currently no evidence that the two cousins from Calgary engaged in any recruitment efforts while in Canada.[42]

Additionally, while in Iraq awaiting her return, RCMP officers extensively interviewed the woman from Calgary and deemed she did not pose a threat.[43] By contrast, the woman from Edmonton is alleged to have not only participated in terrorist activities abroad but also facilitated the radicalization and partially financed travel of at least one Canadian abroad to fight for Daesh after she returned.[44]

This indicates the potential that some returnees may still be committed to their ideologies while others are not.[45] This realization and the considerable differences in needs, risks, and ethical considerations around the return of adults and children, illustrates the complexity of this issue.

SHEHROZE CHAUDHRY

In September 2020, police arrested and charged Shehroze Chaudhry of Burlington, Ontario – featured in the New York Times' podcast, Caliphate – with a rarely used criminal charge following a four-year investigation: hoax terrorist activity. Going by the alias Abu Huzayfah, Chaudhry portrayed himself as a former Daesh member who traveled to Syria in 2014 and alleged that he underwent training, participated in violence, and returned to Canada in 2016.[46]

Chaudhry recounted in gruesome detail to the reporters of Caliphate and other news outlets how he participated in several killings.[47] The podcast caused a backlash in Canada as many wondered why his confessions of criminal and terrorist activity were not used as evidence to arrest him.[48] Around this time, the Government of Canada was negotiating with Kurdish authorities in Syria about a possible handover of the Canadian detainees.

However, these talks ended abruptly after that, possibly due to the backlash over Chaudhry's presence in Canada without charge.[49] Discrepancies within Chaudhry's own story and timeline sowed doubts in his claims, and he was later arrested and charged by Canadian authorities. The charges were later dropped in exchange for Chaudhry admitting his involvement was fabricated.[50]

The second group is individuals alleged to have joined Daesh and remain detained without charge in Kurdish-controlled prisons or prison camps in Iraq and northeastern Syria. Based on estimates from Canadian activists, academics, and journalists who are in touch with families or have traveled to northeastern Syria, there are at least 46 Canadians detained in the region, including 26 children. Most of them are under the age of six.[51]

At least some of these Canadians were residents of or had a nexus to, Alberta. For example, in a CTV News report from 2019, an Alberta woman expressed her desire to return to Canada, especially considering the rapidly deteriorating conditions in the detainee camps and the effect it had on her young children.[52]

Like many other countries that experienced an exodus of foreign fighters, Canada is facing pressure to repatriate these individuals. To date, Canada has repatriated a five-year-old orphan whose Canadian parents and siblings were killed in an airstrike,[53] while a former American diplomat facilitated the return of the woman from Calgary and her child.

While the federal government continues to cite the absence of consular services and the unstable security situation in the country,[54] an array of voices, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Parliamentary Standing Committee, have called for the repatriation of Canadians.[55]

Among Daesh supporters, two Canadian citizens previously discussed in the OPV's 2019 report have been in placed in custody in the United States.

The first is Mohammed Khalifa, a Canadian national detained in 2019 in Syria by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and handed over to the FBI. He was charged with providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization. Khalifa assisted with translating, narrating, and producing English-language propaganda videos intended to recruit individuals from the West to join the Islamic State and conduct attacks against the West.[56]

The second is Abdullahi Ahmed Abdullahi, a Canadian national from Edmonton, Alberta, who helped fund an American's travel to Syria and wired money to support terrorist activities in Syria. Abdullahi was part of the kinship-based network discussed in the OPV's previous report, which saw as many as 14 individuals in Alberta, Minnesota, and Southern California assist one another in their travel to Syria. Abdullahi was indicted in 2014 in the United States and arrested in Canada in 2017. He was extradited to the United States in 2019 to face terrorism charges and has since pled guilty.[57]

RADICALIZING NETWORKS

Media coverage of extremist travelers who left western countries to join groups like Daesh in Syria and Iraq often highlighted the novel aspect of this mobilization: the role that the internet played in inspiring and facilitating the travel of these individuals abroad.

To be sure, the internet did play an important role in increasing the availability of high-quality media content produced by Daesh. It also made individuals already living in territory controlled by the group more accessible to potential travelers.

These 'citizens' were able to both provide a highly romanticized insider's account of life under the so-called caliphate and often played a role in facilitating travel. However, a narrow focus on the online dimension of recruiting risks overlooking the significant effect of persistent radicalizing networks that existed within Western countries.

The limited amount of media coverage devoted to Canadian networks, including those in Alberta, has tended to focus on clusters of individuals – usually friends or families who have traveled together - without discussing the individuals who encouraged or facilitated others to travel.

As a result, there is little publicly available information or general public concern about what role these individuals may play in encouraging another wave of travelers in the future, facilitating terrorist activity abroad, or encouraging domestic attacks.[58]

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