



COMMENTARY

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Terrorists in Toronto: Is Canada Secure? Are We?

By Tanya Primiani and Christopher Sands

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The arrests of 17 suspected terrorists in Canada before they could act should prove three things for skeptics in the United States, particularly for some in Congress. At a hearing hastily arranged on Thursday, Representative John Hostettler (R-Ind.) claimed that “Canada hosts an abundance of terrorists and as many as fifty terrorist organizations.” Counter to such hyperbole, the Canadian arrests should be interpreted as a reassurance that things have changed north of the border since September 11, 2001. First, perceptions of Canadian indifference to terrorism are no longer accurate. Second, Canada is ramping up its counterterrorism efforts and new information sharing is now taking place. Finally, the border is an important element of security, but both countries understand that an attack on either one will harm the interests of the other, and it is important that public opinion on both sides of the border reflects this.

First, any perception of Canadian complacency about terrorism within its borders is now behind us. Even after the attacks in the New York, Washington, Madrid, London, and after terror cells were found in Lackawanna (outside the border city of Buffalo, New York) and Dearborn (outside the border city of Detroit), a large number of Canadians continued to view the threat as low. Many Canadians doubted that terrorists could emerge in a place like Toronto.

Canadian complacency was always difficult to reconcile with the mounting evidence that terrorism could emerge from Canada, but many Canadians believed that the problem could be solved by tighter screening of potential immigrants. The infamous Khadr family based in Ottawa was involved in terrorist attacks in Pakistan, where the father was later killed and one of the sons paralyzed. Another one of the Khadr sons, Omar Ahmed, has been in detention at the Guantanamo facility since July 2002, charged with murder and conspiracy. The Khadr parents earned legitimate citizenship by due process, and the children born in Canada would be birthright citizens. Ghazi Ibrahim Abu Mezer was an immigrant working toward citizenship when he crossed into the United States from Canada in 1997 before making his way to Brooklyn where he was caught, along with Lafi Khalil, with pipe bombs and plans to attack the New York City subway system and the United Nations headquarters. Another, the failed “Millennium Bomber” Ahmed Ressam, who lived in Montreal while planning to attack the Los Angeles International Airport, was denied political-refugee status by Canadian authorities but avoided deportation by obtaining a passport with a false name.

Immigration reforms adopted by the Canadian Parliament after the 2001 attacks in the United States were a positive step toward addressing the problem and demonstrated that the government was taking the problem seriously. However, a widespread view persisted in public opinion that U.S. concerns about terrorism threatened to undermine Canada’s tolerance of diversity and multicultural identity. Yet European societies with similar attitudes toward assimilating new citizens, including the Netherlands and Britain, suffered terrorist acts by birthright citizens lashing out against their own country.

The June 3 arrests give Canadians an opportunity to shed their complacency without suffering bloodshed and the loss of life from a terrorist incident, as the Dutch and British experienced. In the United States, where many citizens and policymakers were aware of and concerned about Canadian public disengagement, the awakened vigilance of Canadians to the terror threat will lead to more tips for law enforcement and more actionable intelligence from law-abiding members of Canadian immigrant communities.

Second, Canadian law enforcement is highly capable and has demonstrated close cooperation with U.S. counterparts in counterterrorism operations. Only some of the details of the lengthy investigation that preceded the arrests in Toronto are known. It is clear, however, that surveillance of the suspected individuals was coordinated between Canadian and

U.S. authorities when these persons crossed the border during the investigation. And, in advance of the Toronto arrests, the arrest of two individuals in Georgia, 21-year-old Syed Ahmed, a Georgia Institute of Technology student, and 19-year-old Ehsanul Sadequee, produced information about a possible link to the Toronto suspects, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation relayed this promptly to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

This kind of communication and information sharing was the result of recent improvements on both sides of the border. In the Abu Mezer case, Canadian authorities had information about his past links to Palestinian organizations on the U.S. terror list, and yet did not share this information with U.S. authorities when Abu Mezer was caught on three separate occasions trying to enter the United States illegally, because this information was volunteered by Abu Mezer in his interview prior to his application for status as a political refugee and was not, under what was then Canadian law (since changed), disqualifying. On September 11, 2001, the two countries maintained separate terror watch lists and communicated this information verbally rather than by computer.

Since the attacks, Canadians have reversed a long trend of underfunding law enforcement agencies. The Cross Border Crime Forum, in operation since 1997, provides an annual venue to discuss threat perceptions and opportunities for coordination and cooperation among law enforcement organizations, the U.S. Department of Justice, and the Canadian Ministry of Justice. From this Forum came the idea for Integrated Border Enforcement Teams, or IBETs, that operate as binational and joint interagency task forces to tackle shared problems and complex, multijurisdictional investigations. Today, there are 23 IBETs operating along the border.

After several years of effort to remove obstacles to necessary coordination between the United States and Canada in countering terrorist and organized criminal activity, U.S. law enforcement officials, from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to the FBI, the U.S. Border Patrol, and the U.S. Coast Guard all praise the cooperation and support they get from their Canadian counterparts today. We can attest to this praise from U.S. officials ourselves, having heard it frequently and without prompting from frontline U.S. officials during a CSIS-organized border tour outside Montreal for congressional staff that we led from June 1 to June 3, immediately before news of the Toronto arrests emerged.

And third, where a U.S. neighbor cooperates fully and unreservedly in aggressively going after terrorists, the border is an element in our security, but not the last resort. Working together seamlessly helps to ensure that nowhere in Canada or the United States can be a safe haven for those who would threaten either country.

Consider the contrast of the close cooperation we witnessed along the border and that has been attested to by officials from DHS secretary Michael Chertoff to former commissioner of U.S. Customs Robert Bonner (who spoke at CSIS earlier this year, in remarks available [here](#)) with the suspicion and mistrust that continues to characterize relations between officials across the U.S.-Mexico border. Representative Hostettler is wrong to insist on a one-size-fits-all solution of building a wall to block Canadian access to the United States — notwithstanding the considerations of cost and practicality, what the Toronto arrests showed is that we are safer through working together today.

And even if a wall was built on the Canadian border, and we mined the Great Lakes, would we really be indifferent to an attack in the Canadian extramural zone? No, because an attack on Canadian soil is capable of having a profound impact in the United States itself. Terrorist attacks seeking to wound icons of U.S. capitalism will find hundreds of economic targets with recognizable U.S. brand names in the factories and offices of General Motors Canada, Ford Canada, Microsoft Canada, Wal-Mart Canada, and many others. Political targets abound, too, with seven U.S. diplomatic posts: an embassy in Ottawa and six consulates general across the country flying the U.S. flag. Most importantly, an attack on any such location would accomplish the terrorists' desired objective of psychological intimidation — striking fear among not only Canadians, but U.S. citizens, too. Why? Take any random group of Canadians, and you will find victims who look exactly like a random group of U.S. citizens, and there is an excellent chance that one or even most of those Canadians will have friends or relatives in the United States. We watched, horrified, in Los Angeles, Miami, Dallas, and Chicago when the World Trade Center was struck by those planes and could not distance ourselves from the victims psychologically, because although they were on the other side of the country, we identified with them. Wouldn't we do the same with Canadians?

This is why fences are a last resort, an extreme measure that is simply unnecessary along the Canadian border. With Canadian cooperation, we can secure more than our border; we can secure the space within the borders of both countries.

This is the key lesson for all North Americans in the Canadian arrests of terror suspects: homegrown terrorists are a problem for every open society. Vigilance and close international cooperation remain our best defenses against this threat. The story of terrorists arrested in Toronto should reassure us that with the elimination of the last vestiges of Canadian complacency about the threat, real efforts by Canada to upgrade its domestic law enforcement, and the close cooperation that now exists between the United States and Canada, Canada is more secure than it was before September 11, 2001 — and so are we.

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