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How to keep young Muslims from embracing violent movements

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A RCMP news conference was a big step forward in winning the trust of Canadian Muslims, many of whom are skeptical of government policy and the security forces' practices

Two boys are in high school in London, Ont. One attends A.B. Lucas Secondary, the other is across town at London South. Both are Muslims and doing well, and both are athletic – one plays hockey, the other football.

A few years later, both come to public attention.

Nazem Kadri has a breakout season with the Toronto Maple Leafs. He is one of the leading scorers on the National Hockey League team, and finds himself being kissed on national television by Don Cherry after recording his second three-goal game.

Ali Medlej is found dead in North Africa. He and another Canadian appear to have been among 29 members of al-Qaeda of the Maghreb, a deadly terrorist group, who died after attacking an Algerian gas plant. No fewer than 38 of the hostages they had taken perished when Algerian forces moved in to end the attack.

What made Mr. Medlej choose the road that led to Algeria?

"I have no idea," says Sikander Hashmi, the 30-year-old Canadian-born imam of a mosque in Kingston, Ont. "But it would have come as he was trying to figure out just who he was," he adds. "So many cases are about identity."

Mr. Hashmi welcomed the announcement this week that Canadian police and intelligence officers had arrested two young men and broken up an alleged plot to bomb a Via Rail/Amtrak train en route to New York from Toronto.

"At first, I thought, 'Uh-oh, here we go again,' " he says, remembering past accusations of terror. "Then I saw the diverse Muslim leaders who were also at the press conference, and breathed easy. It was very impressive."

Including community and religious leaders when the RCMP met the media was both novel and substantive.

One imam, reportedly working through a Toronto law firm, is said to have been a source of information that assisted the investigation and led to the charging of two Muslim men.

"It's a step in the right direction," Mr. Hashmi says. He is concerned not only with detecting extremists but with an equally grave issue: how to keep Canadian

Muslims, or members of any religious, ethnic or political group, from becoming such radicals in the first place.

The remarkable news conference was a big step forward in winning the trust of Canadian Muslims, many of whom are skeptical of government policy and the security forces' practices.

It was also the culmination of a journey that began almost 28 years ago – on June 23, 1985, when Air India Flight 182, bound from Montreal for New Delhi, was blown out of the sky over the North Atlantic. A bomb planted in the luggage killed 329 people, most of them Canadian, making it the biggest terror attack in Canadian history.

Ron Atkey was then chairman of the Security Intelligence Review Committee (SIRC), the body appointed by Parliament to oversee the operations of the newly formed Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), which was responsible for gathering intelligence on threats by and against Canadian security.

"Air India," he says, "was a complete failure on our part." CSIS knew from international intelligence that Sikh nationalists were plotting attacks on Indian targets, but could not get inside the large Punjabi community in the lower mainland of British Columbia.

"It was impenetrable," Mr. Atkey says. As a consequence, the plot to down the Air India flight was never detected. "It was the darkest day in Canadian security history."

And, from that day, Canadian intelligence, police and political leaders have attempted to grapple with the issue of homegrown terrorism, and the radicalization of Canadians. "Everything that changed in Canadian strategy and tactics, came as a result of that failure," Mr. Atkey contends.

The developments along the way weren't always pretty. They included the 2002 case of Maher Arar and his rendition by the United States to Syria, where he was tortured in an attempt to reveal sources and information that might lead Canadian and U.S. officials, both barred from conducting torture themselves, to terrorist plots.

It yielded nothing of the kind; only lawsuits and a black eye for the security service, says Mr. Atkey, who helped with the subsequent inquiry into the Arar debacle.

Also uncovered was the only other case that has resulted in charges: the 2006 plot by the "Toronto 18" to bomb several Canadian institutions, including Parliament, CSIS headquarters and the CBC in Toronto.

Ar first, the plan seemed amateurish to the point of being ridiculous, but in the end proved real enough, and now 11 of the 18 defendants are serving serious jail time.

The means by which the plot was detected and the culprits captured, however, were questionable.

CSIS used two paid informants who participated in planning and preparing for the attacks. One informant purchased the large quantity of fertilizer needed for the bombs, and received a payment of about $4-million from Ottawa.

Such large-scale payouts risk becoming incentives for informants to push some people into planning acts of terrorism. "It's a big concern," Mr. Atkey says, "something that SIRC is constantly on the lookout for."

Further corrections in CSIS's practices flowed from both the Arar inquiry and the

Toronto 18 case, leading to an extensive array of outreach efforts. These included round-table sessions at which members of ethnic and religious groups joined CSIS and police representatives to discuss each other's concerns, as well as community policing, informal meet-and-greet events.

The many attempts to build trust were effective – but identifying a potential terrorist remains extremely difficult.

For starters, Mr. Hashmi says, Muslims and other hyphenated Canadians often live dual lives. "By day, at school, they are Westerners. In their home and at the mosque, they are Muslim, often changing their clothes to look the part and please their parents.

"It frustrates many young people, especially if they feel alienated because they are Muslim."

If the goal of Canadian officials is to get the kind of tip that led to this week's charges, he adds, the goal of Canadian Muslims, Sikhs, Tamils or any other group must be to derail radicalism.

However, a lot of people who turn to *jihad* are already outside the mainstream religious and community groups. "They fly under the radar," Mr. Hashmi explains, and are difficult to detect. "That's the big challenge."

It's not likely the police or community leaders who will learn of these people – the discovery has to come from family and friends.

That is why Mr. Hashmi begins meeting with kids in his mosque when they are as young as Grade 4. He fears that global *jihad* is the most widespread ideology now available, and "young people need to hear alternatives."

"The problem is that a lot of imams in Canada are uncomfortable using the 'j-word,' " he says. "They are defensive. They worry that security officials will hear that they're talking about *jihad*. They avoid it."

And then there is the role played by technology – the immediacy and intimacy of satellite TV and social media.

Mr. Hashmi also meets regularly with university-age Muslims in Kingston. "I asked them recently where they turn for information on the big questions [such as *jihad*and radical Islamic beliefs]. Every one of them said they go to the Internet."

Even in discussing the subject, he says, community leaders run the risk of losing credibility, of raising suspicions that they don't really care but are just hoping to file a report to the police. You can't be both a partner and a suspect.

Which is why Mr. Hashmi considers the Leafs' Mr. Kadri a godsend. "He is a great role model. He shows that you can be both a Muslim and a real Canadian."

Radical responses

There are many paths to violent radicalization and many ways of dealing with it.

Europe

Most Euro nations considered global *jihad* strictly an external threat until 2002, when Dutch politician Pym Fortuyn was killed, followed by film director Theo van Gogh and the Madrid train bombings two years later. Especially after the London Underground attack in 2005, governments got serious, even if members of the public, gripped by varying degrees of Islamophobia, still see the threat as a foreign one.

According to Jocelyne Cesari, a Harvard University specialist in Islam in the West, 40 per cent of Europeans think legal migrants (mostly Muslims) should not have the same civil rights as native-born citizens. As well, a growing minority believes migrants should be sent back to their countries of origin. Such attitudes have led to the growth of right-wing, anti-immigrant political parties and make it increasingly difficult for moderate Muslims to combat radicals.

Britain

Believing that not all radicals are bad and not all fundamentalists are violent, London police began working with more conservative Muslim leaders a decade ago to root out those who preach violent *jihad*.

By helping to offer credible alternatives to the *jihadists*, the influential mosques in Finsbury Park and Brixton were able to rid themselves of al-Qaeda elements.

"Effective counterterrorism policing, and effective al-Qaeda radicalization and recruitment activity are both in the business of building and nurturing trust," wrote Robert Lambert, head of the Muslim Contact Unit at New Scotland Yard from 2002 to 2007. "A gain for one will invariably involve a loss for the other."

However, soon after the Conservative government of David Cameron was elected, it was announced that community programs would no longer be supported. The belief that all radical or puritanical Muslims are outside the ken of British society now prevails.

United States

America was late to recognize it had a homegrown problem. In the period from May, 2009, to November, 2010, Homeland Security found 22 terrorist plots linked to global *jihad*, including the fatal attacks at Fort Hood in Texas and the army recruiting centre in Arkansas.

The response has been aggressive, including planting agents in suspicious groups.

As well, however, Homeland Security has studied radicalization, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation now offers internships to Arabic-speaking students in a bid to build trust.

Officials insist that they no longer consider the communities part of the problem. Still, the emphasis clearly remains on seeing Muslim Americans as a source of tips.