

Questions swirl around Canadians involved in Algerian attack

By Erika Simpson

04/10/2013 Embassy News
magazine in Ottawa

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What led two graduates of South Secondary School in London, Ont. to allegedly join a splinter Al Qaeda group that attacked an Algerian gas plant, taking hostages and randomly killing dozens of foreigners and locals?

Were Ali Medlej and Xristos Katsiroubas motivated by frustration or the presence of politically radical recruiters?

We simply do not know the answers yet. There is no demographic trend that explains why some people choose to become terrorists. Terrorists can be male or female, religious or secular, highly educated or with less than a high-school education. They can be foreign-born and -raised or “home-grown,” as Public Safety Minister Vic Toews and Foreign Minister John Baird describe them.

Like these young men in London, they might not be from poverty-stricken backgrounds, nor necessarily wealthy or highly educated. Their average age tends to be in their early 20s but they can be much older. Mostly single, they can be married and have families.

We do not know a lot about what causes young people to join fundamentalist groups that call for beheading others, hostage taking, and the indiscriminate killing of civilians.

The “Black Widow” terrorists saw their husbands killed or tortured so they are seen to be victims of what is called primary traumatization. But secondary traumatization—when people hear about or view grisly massacres online—can also motivate alienated youth to join radical terrorist groups, like this offshoot group known as Signatories of Blood.

Terrorists’ evolution

Reports are that Canada’s intelligence-gathering agency, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, was watching them before 2007, but not lately. CSIS and the Communications Security Establishment Canada monitor the telecommunications of suspicious individuals, and certainly Al Qaeda cells have historically recruited online and in person, and then trained their suicide bombers overseas.

Should we therefore check everyone’s emails, censor the Internet, and monitor young people’s Facebook accounts so as to determine whether they are thinking of joining a radical terrorist group? It would be expensive, fruitless, and nigh impossible. Moreover, there is no demographic trend that identifies would-be third-generation terrorists.

The first generation learned side by side with Osama bin Laden and his right-hand man, Ayman al-Zawahari, while the second generation developed hundreds of autonomous cells that communicated with each other but did not necessarily agree, meet, or train together.

The third generation seems to learn from the Internet, watch televised happenings, and adopt Global Salafism's perception of the "Near Enemy" and the "Far Enemy" on their own, perhaps because they harbour suicidal tendencies.

Prevention difficult

We can learn about and advocate for ways to help prevent teenage and young-adult suicide. We can alert medical counsellors and police authorities (as one family member of the alleged terrorists reportedly did, here in London). If we think our sons and daughters are feeling alienated and alone, we can try to make sure they are not attracted to radical groups bent on fomenting violence.

But entirely stopping home-grown terrorism will be difficult. The fact that these young men came from London really means they could have come from any mid-sized urban town in Canada.

The causes of third-generation terrorism are not due to the denial of opportunities, relative inequality or poor job prospects for youth. We simply do not know yet what factors lead young men and women to join radical jihadist cells.

We do know from studying the writings of home-grown terrorists in the past that their behaviour seems to have its roots in mental instability, arising almost inexplicably from nowhere.

As the Unabomber case demonstrates, it is always difficult to pinpoint who is more likely to succumb to terrorist ideology, so such proposals as somehow censoring the Internet are not workable solutions.

Solutions

What can be done, then, to combat terrorism and suicide bombers?

Some hard-power techniques include strengthening North America's intelligence-gathering and intensifying its military reprisals. Using new technology, like drones, can disrupt or destroy terrorist organizations, but it can also create new cycles of terror in retaliation.

North America could also increase its homeland security, erecting more walls to prevent terrorists from entering. But these can incite frustration if they entail policies such as racial or religious profiling that are seen to violate human rights and encourage a Fortress America mentality.

Some soft-power techniques would be to decrease primary and secondary traumatization by reducing or ceasing military reprisals, creating more trust between adversaries and setting up programs that educate youth on the benefits and successes of non-violent campaigns.

Obviously ending the transmission of horrifying images through the Internet and video games—images that can inspire alienated individuals—is another feasible option, which United States lawmakers are grappling with in the wake of the two latest shooting rampages there.

We should also oppose the belief systems of groups that espouse indiscriminate, randomized killing, including the makers of many violent online video games.

Moderate Muslims around the world will also need more help to stand against the crusading discourse by radical Islamists, specifically Global Salafists, who preach non-negotiable goals with no middle ground. The dichotomous understanding of friends versus foes leads fundamentalists to portray moderate voices as part of the “crusading imperialism” of the Far Enemy.

This sort of cosmic thinking is fuelled by rants against the perceived enemy. For example, according to bin Laden, “The people of Islam have suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed on them by the Zionist-Crusader alliance.”

Such diatribes by the first- and second-generation of bin Laden’s followers, many of whom have since been martyred and killed, seem to play a powerful role in activating third-generation terrorism.

Alienated young people with suicidal tendencies need to be discouraged from believing it is somehow noble to join the global “struggle.”

By encouraging all moderates, including moderate Muslims, to take a stand in their communities, churches, mosques, and schools against extremism, we ourselves can help combat values and practices that incite indiscriminate killing.

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04/10/2013 Embassy News magazine in Ottawa (hard copy, p. 27): and online version available at: <http://www.embassynews.ca/opinion/2013/04/09/questions-swirl-around-canadians-involved-in-algerian-attack/43622>.