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RESEARCH BRIEF

TERRORISM AND THE TERRORIZED:

# How the ‘Terrorism’ Label is Informed and Applied to a Violent Attack in Canada

Shannon Nash

(Trent University and Network Manager of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security  
Network (NAADSN))

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For more information, contact the Director of the Network, Lorne Dawson, Balsillie School of International Affairs, University of Waterloo ([ldawson@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:ldawson@uwaterloo.ca)) or Elizabeth Ford Project Manager of TSAS [ec2ford@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:ec2ford@uwaterloo.ca).

## SUMMARY

- The threat posed by al Qaeda, Daesh, and those inspired by their ideologies, has framed the way Canada has understood and labelled terrorism for almost twenty years, but the framework within which we compartmentalize and understand terrorists needs to be adapted.
- There is a fluidity to the “terrorism” label and an inherent inequality in its application in Canada with symbolic, rhetorical, political, and cultural implications.
- Racism, Islamophobia, white supremacy, and how and who we frame as “other” or “terrorist” are all profoundly connected. Hate and prejudice are inflamed by racist attitudes, the espoused ideology of right-wing extremists, and the social polarization, distrust, and fear that are becoming uncomfortably mainstream.

## METHODS

This project was designed to look at the question: how is the ‘terrorism’ label informed and applied to a violent attack in Canada? The purpose of this research is to explore the use and meaning of the terrorism label, gaps in its application, the social and legal intersections of the label, the fluidity of the term, and recommendations for further discussion and study. This research is based upon extensive reviews of Canadian government documents, legal documents, case studies, speeches, press releases, official statements, international threat reporting, secondary sources, and media articles. This author conducted interviews with academics and officials from Public Safety Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), and the Toronto Police Service to inform this study. This research is both historically and contemporarily informed.

## CONTEXT

The origin of term “terror” is fear, dread, and panic, and it depicts an emotional state, whereas “terrorism” is a tactic. It is not enough for violence to inadvertently scare (in essence to terrorize) those directly and indirectly targeted by the violence, rather such fear must be the goal of terrorist acts (Byman 2020). The definition of “terrorism” remains an open topic of debate in the field, among academics and practitioners, and the United Nations has yet to establish a commonly accepted definition. However, the distinguishing features of terrorism are commonly, but still somewhat subjectively, defined as: 1) violence (or threat of), 2) by non-state actor(s), 3) against non-combatant targets, 4) to achieve a broader psychological effect, 5) for a specific purpose. This purpose does not have to be wholly rational or achievable

(Meserole and Byman 2019). In Canada, this last aspect of the conception of terrorism is legally defined as an act committed “in whole or in part for a political, religious or ideological purpose, objective, or cause” (Canadian Criminal Code 2001).

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Canada followed a jihadi-centric threat narrative, which influenced what constituted terrorism. The Canadian system of counter-terrorism was designed under the threat of al Qaeda, and terror offences align historically with the tactics and behaviour of al Qaeda-inspired terrorists. Over and against the more amorphous movements of right-wing extremism, such groups and individuals could be compartmentalized as a distinct set of actors. In this context, 56 of the 58 terrorism charges laid in Canada have been cases of individuals inspired by al Qaeda or Daesh or the violent ideologies such groups espouse<sup>1</sup> (West 2020). The “terrorist” label has been and is readily applied to violent incidents involving Muslims or those linked to what has been referred to as “Islamic extremism”.<sup>2</sup> There is a “Muslimization” of the problem of terrorism in the public sphere, and there “remains an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ aspect to Canadian discourse and actions in the counterterrorism realm” (Littlewood, Dawson, and Thompson 2020). Still, overall, there is a fluidity to the “terrorism” label and an inherent inequality in its application in Canada, with symbolic, rhetorical, political, and cultural implications. An analysis of [Canada’s Terrorist Entity Listings](#) (see *Figure 1*) and the [Public Reports on the Terrorist Threat to Canada from 2013 - 2018](#) indicates a nearly exclusive focus on al Qaeda and Daesh-inspired terrorism. In the Public Reports, right-wing extremism (RWE) only briefly appears in the 2017 report, and then again in the 2018 one, with minimal retroactive attention to the case of Justin Bourque. The threat posed by al Qaeda, Daesh, and those inspired by their ideologies, has framed the way Canada has understood and labelled terrorism for almost twenty years, but as the threat from other ideologically affiliated groups emerges, the framework we use to compartmentalize and understand terrorists needs to be adapted.

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<sup>1</sup> Two exceptions are in 2008 an individual was charged for raising funds for a Tamil militant group and in May 2020 terror charges were laid for an Incel-inspired attack by a youth in Toronto.

<sup>2</sup> “Islamic extremism” (and other such terms linking a religion or ethnic group with extremism instead of a cause or motivation) contribute to a “Muslimization” of terrorism in Canada. Such labels have been justly criticized for unintentionally maligning certain communities. In response to criticism of such terminology used in the 2018 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada, Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale said “It is neither accurate nor fair to equate any one community, or an entire religion, to extremist violence or terror. To do so is simply wrong or inaccurate...Language matters, and just because something has often been phrased in a certain way does not mean that it should be phrased in that way now, or in the future” (Zimonjic, CBC News 2019).





as terrorist entities in Canada. Yet there is a reluctance to list RWE groups that are present and dangerous here and elsewhere.

Although it is not a new phenomenon, the rate of increase in frequency and lethality of RWE has scholars and practitioners ringing alarm bells about the threat posed by racially and ethnically motivated terrorism. The [2018 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada](#) discusses RWE as being “traditionally driven by hatred and fear, and includes a range of individuals, groups, often online communities, that back a wide range of issues and grievances, including, but not limited to: anti-government and anti-law enforcement sentiment, advocacy of white nationalism and racial separation, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, anti-immigration, male supremacy (misogyny) and homophobia.” According to a 2020 [United Nations Security Council report](#), RWE is “not a coherent or easily defined movement, but rather a shifting, complex, and overlapping milieu of individuals, groups and movements (online and offline) espousing different, but related ideologies.” It involves links to transnational networks of like-minded individuals, and the Ukraine has emerged as a hub in the broader networks of white supremacist extremism, attracting foreign fighters from all over the world (The Soufan Center 2019). RWE is broadly defined, but there is a difference between the ideologically motivated extremist violence of the far right, and the extremism of the fringe elements of right leaning social movements.

## CONSIDERATIONS

Terrorism designations and definitions are muddy, malleable, and political. The label reflects and reinforces public attitudes. There is a blurriness to the term “terrorism” and who uses the label in the social/political context. However, to meet the legal definition, the motivation of the perpetrator(s) must be proven to meet the evidentiary standards of a court for conviction. Terrorist activity is defined in the Criminal Code, but ideology is not. However, Kent Roach believes the “ideological purpose, objective, or cause” aspect of the Canadian legal definition is very broad and he believes sometimes people overthink what constitutes an ideology within this definition (Roach 2019). An array of motivations can be associated with political, religious or ideological causes, yet the growth of the far-right politically and internationally has blinded us to some ideologies that border mainstream politics. Although neither the Quebec City Mosque attack in 2017 nor the Incel-inspired van attack in Toronto in 2018 resulted in terrorism charges, both attacks have been referred to as terrorism by some sources after the attack (some years later as the threat environment continued to change), including select politicians, academics, government reports, and the Global Terrorism Index. The rationale for not labelling ideologically motivated attacks and the idea that we cannot do it because we have not done it before, reflects a lack of determination and leadership. This logic certainly did not allow for the



same questions to stop the use of the terrorism label and offences for individuals associated with al Qaeda and Daesh. A more proactive and preventative approach to RWE is essential, but terrorism prevention often requires the use of electronic surveillance or human sources of intelligence, and while jihadi-inspired terror groups have traditionally been more readily labelled and defined, RWE requires increased resources and attention for proactive prevention of terrorism. There is an interplay between the way the law is interpreted and applied, and prevention capabilities, with the narrow focus of the terrorist entity listings on the jihadi-inspired threat.

In the two decades since 9/11, the Canadian narrative of what constitutes terrorism, and who is a “terrorist,” has had detrimental societal impacts. There is the perception, which has persisted, that terrorists are “foreign” or “other”. There is a complacency in defining terrorism as not “us”, but “them,” and the inherent inequality in the application of the terrorism label along racial and ethnical lines informs how those who are marginalized or victimized view their own safety and security. The compartmentalization of “terrorists” as “other” and nearly exclusively “Muslim” in Canada, and internationally, has paralleled a rise in hate directed against Muslims<sup>4</sup> (see Figures 2-4). Barbara Perry suggests that hate and terrorism “exist along a single continuum of fear and intimidation, differing in degree rather than kind” (Perry 2009). The manifestations of hate and terrorism are starting to overlap more and more, but not everyone who espouses hate becomes a terrorist.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, hate grows in enabling environments and “[r]hetorical and physical assaults are often invoked when victims are perceived to threaten the racialized boundaries which are meant to separate ‘us’ from ‘them’” (Perry and Scrivens 2018). As the graphs below indicate, 30 per cent of respondents to a recent poll believe Muslims in Canada follow Sharia law, and in 2017 there were 47 per cent more hate crimes reported to police in Canada, and hate crimes perpetrated against Muslims grew exponentially.

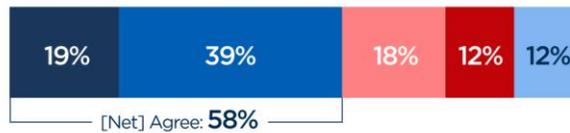
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<sup>4</sup> In 2019, then Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale commented on changes to the language of the *2018 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada* that aimed to be more accurate in depicting terrorist groups and to discourage the recent rise in hate crimes across the country. Goodale said: “Words do matter... There is a rise in hate crimes, and there is another form of terrorism that is happening in communities, not just here in Canada, but in the world” (Zimonjic, CBC News 2019). Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens also conclude that the effect of patterns, such as law enforcement approaches or contacts with Arabs and Muslims, draw a line between “law abiding” Canadians and “terrorist” Muslims. They also conclude that this “reinforces the public perception that Muslims are questionable with respect to their loyalty to Canada, and with respect to their knowledge of if not involvement in terrorism” (Perry and Scrivens 2018).

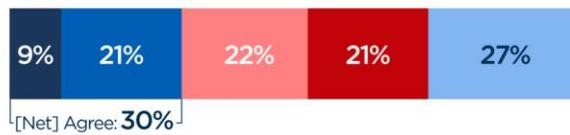
<sup>5</sup> There is some debate in the scholarship about the relationship between hate and terrorism and Justin Everett Cobain Tetrault cautions that “Hate too often functions as a placeholder for missing knowledge about right-wing movements... Hate stereotyping distracts from more accurate and nuanced explanations for collective action” (Tetrault 2019). According to Tetrault, precise, nuanced and reflexive terminology when referring to RWE helps draw “analytical attention to slightly different aspects of the dynamics characteristic of these groups” (Tetrault 2019).



Islamophobia is a problem that needs to be addressed in Canada



Muslims in Canada follow Sharia law, not Canadian laws



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Figure 2 source: [Ipsos/Global News](#), 2019

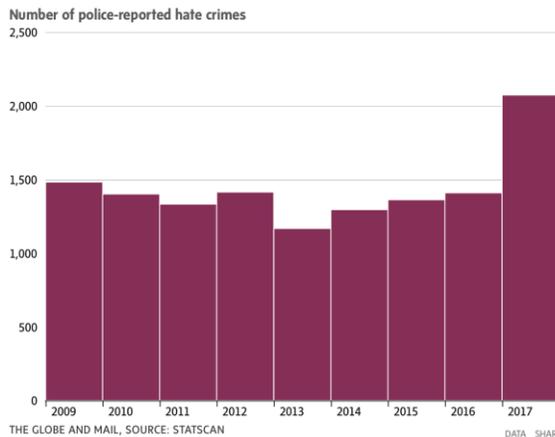


Figure 3 source: [STATSCAN, The Globe and Mail](#), 2019

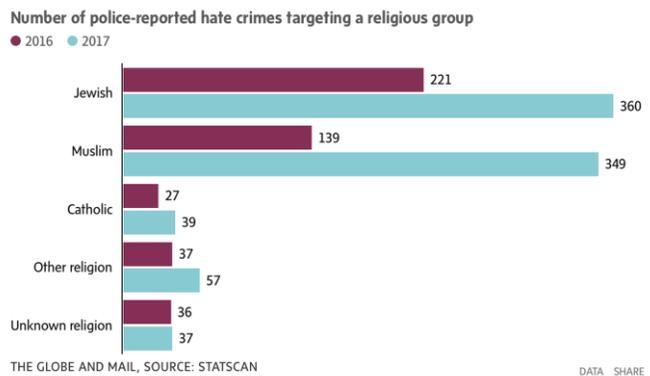


Figure 4 source: [STATSCAN, The Globe and Mail](#), 2019

Islamophobia is a dangerous and deeply concerning threat. Such hate and prejudice are inflamed by racist attitudes, the espoused ideology of RWE, and the social polarization, distrust, and fear that are becoming uncomfortably mainstream. In response to threats made against a downtown Toronto-area mosque in October 2020, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [tweeted](#) that “Islamophobia and hate have no place in our country, and this kind of behaviour and language will not be tolerated. We must do more to counter hatred and we will.” Racism, Islamophobia, white supremacy, and how and who we frame as “other” or “terrorist,” are all profoundly connected. Jihadi-inspired attacks have been used to drive a narrative of “radical Islamic



terrorism,” and there is a growing concern of reciprocal radicalization and tit-for-tat violence that will further amplify discord and energize right-wing extremists (The Soufan Group 2020).

While the CSIS and the RCMP have recently made statements that terrorism is not restricted to a particular group or religion,<sup>6</sup> this research shows that there must be a reckoning. Since 9/11 our conceptualization of who is a “terrorist” has been largely restricted to those who are in some way “others” or foreign. The way terrorism is framed and clarified from extremism, by the government and its institutions, shapes how police and security agencies implement policy and how the public perceives these policies and “terrorist” attacks. Perceptions of “what is terrorism” and “who is a terrorist” shape how the reality of the threat is understood. The politicization of the terrorism label gives it a subjective quality and affects both media reporting and public perceptions.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we need to adjust our conceptions of terrorism for three main reasons: 1) to begin to acknowledge and reckon with the unfair and misleading Muslimization of terrorism; 2) to adapt to evolving terror threats outside of our existing framework of applying the label for efficient and effective counter-terrorism policies and practices 3) to better understand the relationship between terrorism, the far right, and mainstream political motivations. Extremism and conspiracy, both domestically informed and shaped by international politics, must be parsed and rejected from legitimate political discourse. The January 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, instigated by the President of the United States, has made this dangerously clear.

## NEXT STEPS

While terrorism remains a chronic problem, there is an urgency of this moment that necessitates attention. There is a great deal of concern about the role of technology and how it transmits violent ideologies. Disinformation, misinformation, and foreign interference are the backdrop to the growth of populism and the rise of conspiracy theories. Global health security and climate change are changing the prioritization of national security threats and how we frame those threats continues to change. International influences, especially the polarization of American politics and the transnational rise of RWE, shape the context within which terrorism operates internationally and how extremism and white supremacy are flourishing at local levels. How society collectively frames the “other” and “terrorism” is reflective of the cultural norms of this given moment of history, including the prejudice of RWE that is uncomfortably

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<sup>6</sup> This is also reflected in the [CSIS Report](#) released in May 2020 which has positively helped to shape the way national security threats are framed. Its inclusiveness in what is considered a threat is a step in the right direction to acknowledging the importance of terminology.

<sup>7</sup> The media, and particularly social media, shapes social attitudes and contributes to personal echo chambers, but a comprehensive study of the application of the label by the media was beyond the scope of this work.



mainstream. If “terrorism” continues to be labelled along racial and ethnic lines, prejudice will continue to seep into the fabric of Canadian society and resilience will suffer.

There are no simple solutions to this tremendously complex phenomenon. The following are recommendations for consideration informed by this research, especially the interviews conducted by this author. These suggestions are intended to encourage further discussion and study of the terrorism label with recommendations to address the implications of its inequality and the rise of RWE. The list is purposefully diverse in nature to capture the wide range of issues and conversations that arise in a discussion of how we identify terrorists in Canada. These recommendations are for an expansive Canadian audience, including individuals from government agencies, law enforcement agencies, police trainers and educators, academics, journalists, and the public.

### **Clear Terminology**

- Clear, consistent terminology needs to be developed to frame “threats to national security,” and in ways which include ideological motivations across a spectrum of causes and motivations;
- Political leaders need to recognize the central role they play in encouraging or suppressing polarization and extremism;
- “Violent extremism” is frequently used by Canadian government agencies to frame terror threats, but until this concept is better clarified, it adds further blurriness to the rhetoric surrounding public discussions of terrorism and counter-terrorism;
- We need to disentangle terrorism from extremism. Terrorism is a tactic, whereas extremism is a belief system (Berger, 2018). Extremists can use terrorism, but many eschew the tactic and not everyone who employs the tactic of terrorism is necessarily an extremist. Therefore, the terms should not be used interchangeably.

### **Equal Application**

- Officials need to apply the terrorism label equally across ethnic, racial, and cultural differences. The label must be applied equally both in official and non-official statements, and in practice through political priorities and mandates, law enforcement training and day-to-day operations, media reporting, community outreach, and public discourse;
- Using the label equally to apply to terrorist threats to national security will equip law enforcement agencies with prevention tools to detect and disrupt threats and protect the public;



- Further, we need to clarify the definition of “right-wing extremism” to address the diverse nationalist groups operating in Canada with conflicting goals and ideas, ranging from mainstream conservative values to neo-Nazism.

### **Education**

- To bring greater clarity to public policy discussions, we need more education about these issues. We need to encourage a broader discourse in the media, government, training programs, law enforcement, the justice system, community outreach programs, schools, and society in general. This means challenging the dominant narrative (the way we perceive most terrorists), with a continued focus on teaching diversity, empathy, and inclusiveness;
- Especially we need to facilitate a discourse within these realms on the issues of race, identity, politics, and intersections of the social, political, and legal realms.

### **Online Efforts**

- To this end, we also need to encourage greater digital and media literacy across Canadian society, especially as misinformation and disinformation is flourishing;
- In addition, addressing the role platforms play in fostering and emboldening extremism – this became a galvanizing issue after the attack in Christchurch - and Canada should continue prioritizing this issue and engaging with tech companies to do so.

### **Specialized Prosecutors and Additional Law Enforcement Training**

- The manifestations of hate and terrorism overlap and in the criminal and policy context, and right-wing extremists pose a challenge to discerning between hate motivated crimes and terrorism;
- We need more specialized police and prosecutors, with a focus on terrorism and counter-terrorism and we need to continue to investigate what effective community policing looks like for effective counter-terrorism;<sup>8</sup>
- This includes additional training of law enforcement, especially training on right-wing extremism and the continuum of hate and terrorism, and how we understand extremism, within the context of current trends.

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<sup>8</sup> Community policing focuses on community partnerships and problem solving centred on the needs of a specific community. It places the responsibility for community relations “on every officer, instead of the traditional approach of specialized units. The emphasis shifts from one of bureaucratic process to concrete results, and the power base shifts from complete police control to a shared power with the community” (Canada Department of Justice).



## Investment

- Canada has focused efforts on prevention, but even additional prevention and research allocations should be considered;
- Resources should be assigned proportionally to the threats Canadians are really facing;
- In doing so we should strive to stop the cycle of resource loss and retooling that happens every time we face a more defined threat.

## Framework for Terrorist Entity Listings

- We need to move beyond a reluctance to critically assess how terrorist entities are classified and listed as proscribed entities, and institute greater transparency in the process by which entities are listed;
- This means that the “terrorist” label and the Listed Terrorist Entities must adapt to include new and emerging national security threats, including right-wing extremist groups with a history of violence in Canada and abroad;
- We also need to address the intelligence to evidence challenge and make a lot more inroads on our ability to share classified information in an open court system when prosecuting these security threats.

## The Big Picture

- We need to refrain from isolating terror incidents or ideologies. It is vital to link what is going on “over there” to what could happen or is happening here. This includes linking individuals or communities with provincial/national/global movements without detaching and “other-ing” political, religious, or ideological motivations and movements;
- For example, jihadi-inspired individuals are usually linked by those who speak about them (i.e., the media) to a global network/movement, whereas right-wing extremists are more often treated as isolated or local incidents, with poverty or mental illness as driving factors. By seeing the big picture, we can begin to connect the intricacies of the threats and better understand the security concerns they pose.

## Prevention and Resilience

- In addition to engaging with the big picture, supporting education and digital literacy, we need to engage with the broader Canadian population, beyond those directly affected by terrorism, extremism, and hate. This means engaging Canadian society as whole, from local communities to federal politics, to address problems associated with systemic racism;
- This is a daunting task, but one that must be reckoned with to begin to foster and support the resilience of marginalized and victimized communities, as well as Canadian society as a whole;



- Fostering collective and individual resilience is at the core of prevention and preparedness. As terror threats evolve domestically and through international influences, so must efforts to support the ability of Canadians of all backgrounds to cope and respond to change or adversity. At the core of this resilience is equality and anti-racist policies and practices;
- We need to come to terms with how mainstream prejudice and hate have become, in order to move forward. It is not just happening “over there”, it is happening here.

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***Author Bibliography:***

Dr. Shannon Nash is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Trent University and Network Manager of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN). [shannonnash@trentu.ca](mailto:shannonnash@trentu.ca)  
Twitter: @shannonhopenash

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***Keywords:***

Terrorism; Hate; Extremism

***Suggested Highlights:***

- There is a fluidity to the “terrorism” label and an inherent inequality in its application in Canada with symbolic, rhetorical, political, and cultural implications.
- Terrorism designations and definitions are muddy, malleable, and political. There is the perception, which has persisted throughout history, of terrorists as “foreign” or “other” and the label reflects and reinforces public attitudes.



- While terrorism remains a chronic problem, there is an urgency of this moment that necessitates attention. How society collectively frames the “other” and “terrorism” is operating in the cultural norms of this given moment of history and within the prejudice of right-wing extremism that is uncomfortably mainstream.