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The Terrorist Sleeper Threat in an Age of Anxiety

About the Author



Dr. Shannon Nash is the Postdoctoral Network Manager of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN). She coordinates NAADSN events, research projects and outputs, multimedia presence, website, and reports. She promotes relationships between the network and collaborators and manages NAADSN's student and graduate research fellows. As part of her work with NAADSN, Dr. Nash is a post-doctoral research fellow at Trent University studying past and present terrorist threats and attacks as well as Canadian, American, and international defence, security and counterterrorism policies.

Her current research examines the fluidity of the "terrorism" label and how the label is informed and applied to a violent attack in Canada. This research looks at how racism, Islamophobia and white supremacy, and how and who we frame as "other", or "terrorist", are all profoundly connected. Dr. Nash is also working on a project at the University of Waterloo that looks at education and training in national security and counterterrorism in Canada. She has recently completed a review of important studies and practical efforts to anticipate and reduce risk factors contributing to lasting traumatization of terrorist victims for a chapter in the forthcoming Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness (Ed. Alex P. Schmid).

Dr. Nash received her Ph.D. in History from the University of Toronto with a focus on 20th Century American History, Terrorism, and International Relations. Her doctoral thesis looks at the reality of al Qaeda espionage methodology and how the idea of a sleeper agent was perceived and adapted to fit the terrorist threat posed by al Qaeda from the 1990s onwards. She is presently addressing North American perceptions of sleepers after 9/11 and the consequences of a lingering fixation on the operational model. Continuing the work from her doctorate, she is pursuing research on how the idea of an enemy within intersects with an "us" versus "them" counterterrorism discourse and the rise of hate and right-wing extremism. She is studying the politicization of this concept, and the social and security implications of perceived threats.

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Abstract

The concept of a sleeper plays on society's inherent fears of an enemy within and exposes vulnerabilities within a society, especially the fault line privileging security over civil liberties. Terrorist sleepers received attention in North America around the millennium when a bombing plot by Ahmed Ressam targeting LAX in 1999 was foiled at the Canadian border. By attempting to solve one kind of problem – the under-diagnosis of al Qaeda's operational security before 9/11 and a failure of imagination – officials and the media created another problem after 9/11: an excess of imagination and the over-diagnosis of al Qaeda's use of sleeper agents. Ascendant fears of an enemy within after 9/11 were rooted in an age of anxiety that shaped perceptions and obscured the reality of the threat as it evolved. This chapter will be guided by the questions: How did the "Ressam Effect" influence North American perceptions of sleepers after 9/11? What was the reality of the sleeper threat after 9/11? How did the threat shift to "homegrown terrorism" and what was the consequence of a lingering fixation on sleepers? What are the implications of North American perceptions of the threat posed by an enemy within?

Keywords:

Terrorism, Terrorist, Sleepers, North America, Al Qaeda, Islamophobia, Racism, Homegrown

Introduction

The idea of a sleeper agent often evokes the image of a spy or terrorist living next door, laying low, blending in, and waiting to be called upon to carry out an operation. This concept, and the fear of an enemy operating from within, is particularly jarring as it plays on society's perception of security. While Russian espionage practices during the Cold War set the mold for the idea, there is a fluid boundary around what constitutes a sleeper. This is especially salient as a translation of the operational concept occurred from a world of state-on-state action to a world centred on the possible use of sleepers by non-state actors for the purpose of advancing terrorist objectives. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, investigations revealed how the hijackers concealed their intentions and blended in with their host country for a period of time before executing their mission. The reality of al Qaeda operational tactics, including those deployed in plots before and after 9/11, diverged from the notion of sleepers as deep-cover agents to operatives more akin to "nappers." Al Qaeda had an interest in associating with and utilizing operatives with sufficient security awareness to avoid detection in foreign countries for a shorter rather than longer time frame.¹ The organization valued attempted operations it was either directly or indirectly involved in during the 1990s, despite their lack of success, as they provided critical operational experience in entering and embedding.² This includes Ahmed Ressam, who planned to attack Los Angeles International Airport before his plot was foiled at the Canadian border in 1999. The memory of Ressam's plot crystalized in the wake of 9/11 and the narrative that terrorists may launch their next attack from Canada gained traction. Through the vector of the sleeper threat, the United States and Canada viewed each other as both necessary and vulnerable.³

However, the reality that authorities discovered no true sleepers in North America after 9/11 was largely eclipsed by the socially and politically adopted perception that al Qaeda used sleepers to attack and there were more in waiting.⁴ According to the 9/11 Commission Report, the 9/11 attacks revealed a failure in imagination but, in response to this, North America suffered from an excess of imagination

after 9/11.⁵ A consequence of the exaggerated concern that al Qaeda operatives were here and being patient was that it hindered an appreciation of the shifting terrorist threat in the mid-2000s to lone actors and homegrown terrorists with low-sophistication tactics committing high-impact violent attacks. This contributed to a misallocation of resources and less effective counterterrorism, including of an over-militarized approach with expansive objectives. After 9/11, Canada and the United States followed a jihadi-centric threat narrative, and this nearly exclusively defined the way North America has understood and labelled terrorism in the last twenty years. The perception that terrorists are “foreign” or “other” has persisted and there has been a complacency in defining terrorists along racial and ethnical lines as not “us”, but them”. This became even more complicated as homegrown, radicalized individuals or groups became enemies operating within, inspired by jihadist causes and actions. The “Muslimization” of terrorism⁶ after 9/11 was a consequence of the search for an enemy within and it has fostered and inflamed Islamophobia. Hate and prejudice have become uncomfortably mainstream and according to a 2020 US Homeland Threat Assessment: “racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists – specifically white supremacist extremists (WSEs) – will remain the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland.”⁷ Adapting to evolving terror threats outside of the jihadi-centric framework requires a reckoning with the unfair and misleading Muslimization of terrorism.

The “Ressam Effect”

In the lead up to 9/11, the idea that al Qaeda tried to use sleepers in its operations did not begin to develop and take shape until quite suddenly, and for a short time, with two disrupted plots linked to al Qaeda in December 1999. The first was a plot in Jordan targeting American interests abroad with connections to individuals in the United States and the second was a plot by Ahmed Ressam, an Algerian living illegally in Montreal who attempted to travel to the United States to carry out an attack on Los Angeles International Airport on or around January 1, 2000.⁸ On December 14, 1999, Ressam drew the attention of a US Customs agent as he attempted to cross the border by ferry from Victoria, Canada to Port Angeles, near Seattle. Inspectors examining his rental car found more than 100 pounds of explosive materials and four timing devices.⁹ According to Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) officials, Ressam was under surveillance in Montreal as part of a larger investigation of the suspected terrorist ring from 1996 to 1998 but they were unaware of his alias and he was not detected until the “chance” intervention of US border security.¹⁰ A summer 2001 news report depicted Ressam’s arrest as triggering “an allergic reaction: more U.S. and Canadian customs inspectors and airport surveillance cameras, broader binational sharing of criminal-intelligence data, and joint law-enforcement operations that were formerly unthinkable.”¹¹ Ressam was linked to associates of al Qaeda and trained in Afghanistan, but he conceived and prepared for the attack largely on his own and he was not acting on direction from bin Laden.¹² After discovering that Ressam was laying low and plotting to attack the United States using his terrorist connections, authorities began to associate terrorist sleeper agents with a perceived threat to the North American homeland with cross-border vulnerabilities.

Ressam’s case became a symbol of the perceived threat posed by terrorists coming from Canada. According to Kenneth R. Timmerman, Ressam became “the face of Canada’s failure to confront terrorism.”¹³ The missteps in the Ressam case resulted in what Kerry Pither referred to as the “Ressam Effect” – the need to avoid making the same mistakes as with Ressam and be seen as a reliable counterterrorism partner.¹⁴ Sam Mullins refers to Ressam’s arrest as “a watershed moment for Canadian counter-terrorism, stoking fears in the U.S. that its northern neighbour was lax

on security and therefore a potential threat. It simultaneously served as a wake-up call for Canadian authorities who had been monitoring Islamist militant networks."¹⁵ However, both Canada and the United States, like other Western countries, failed to grasp the seriousness of the threat before 9/11.¹⁶ The domestic threat posed by operatives like Ressam was widely accepted as a more venomous version of the ordinary terror threat, but the complex threat posed by al Qaeda, global connections between what was going "over there" to what was happening "over here," and its methodology and operational security was unfamiliar and therefore seemed improbable.

North American Fears of Sleepers after 9/11

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda made it abundantly clear that they were a radically new threat, beyond any yet experienced. According to a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) presentation on the 9/11 plot, the hijackers hid "in plain view" while in the United States for months, and in some cases years.¹⁷ They laid low in an attempt to blend into some of the norms of American society but there is no evidence of any deep cover creation or long term dormancy, especially in the case of the pilots who pursued flight training.¹⁸ After the millennium plots, the boundary around the concept of a sleeper was stretched to basically mean a terrorist agent in place. In an environment of fear and paranoia about a second wave of attacks, al Qaeda *modus operandi* became inextricably linked to a use of operatives imbedded within. Former CIA Director George Tenet said, "It was inconceivable to us that Bin Ladin had not already positioned people to conduct second, and possibly third and fourth waves of attacks inside the United States."¹⁹

According to a CSIS Report obtained by the Washington Post in 2002, al Qaeda "sleeper cells" in Canada and the United States communicated with each other – a reality of the transnational nature of al Qaeda and its adeptness of transcending borders.²⁰ While the focus of American military and CIA operations were abroad, according to US officials quoted in the report, "neutralizing the potential terrorist threat in Canada remains a top priority."²¹ Political commentaries framed Canada as a "safe haven of choice" for al Qaeda, playing an unwitting role as a safe haven for terrorists aided by "a leaky US-Canada line".²² Ressam's arrest in 1999 was often framed as the first tip-off to the magnitude of this problem.²³ One report opined that "For some Americans, the news that terrorists lurk north of the border must have seemed like a venal betrayal."²⁴ Media stories and comments by some US officials perpetuated the stubborn myth that some of the 9/11 hijackers "sneaked over the 3,987-mile border from Canada" because "Canada's lax immigration and refugee laws make it easy for extremists to set up shop north of the border."²⁵ Known cases of extremists entering the United States through its land borders to the north (and the south) are exceedingly rare, but incessant inaccuracies about the threat have been politicized and popularized. In addition to structural, policy, legal, and judicial reforms, budgetary increases for national security, redeployment of police and border security resources, and national defence commitments to the "War on Terror", Canada worked with its allies to dismantle global jihadi terror networks.

The global context shaped the domestic situation in North America and international terrorist links persisted after 9/11, but the reduced threat in terms of likely capacity to perpetrate large-scale, sophisticated attacks paralleled an increase in counter-terrorism capabilities.²⁶ Reg Whitaker aptly points out that "Post-9/11 Canadian-American security relations are about the realities of terrorist threats, but they are also about myths. America's northern border as a risk to its homeland security is part reality and part myth."²⁷ The reality of the threat is found in sober intelligence analysis and responsible security plan-

ning both in Canada and the United States.²⁸ Furthermore, Whitaker says there is “very little evidence that Canadian security is any less vigilant than that of America” and if there was any performance gap in the past, he points to fewer resources available to Canadians relative to their American counterparts – a gap he indicates was closing even prior to 9/11.²⁹ Canadian officials were persistently forced to confront anti-Canadian suspicions that form a political background to American perceptions of Canada.³⁰ The American fixation on rooting out sleepers during this age of anxiety played into the “Ressam Effect” and the myth of Canada as a safe haven for terrorists blurred the reality of Canada’s role as “an effective partner in working with the United States to keep foreign terrorist suspects from entering North America.”³¹

The Reality of the Sleeper Threat Post-9/11: Suspected Sleepers in North America

In December 2001, President Bush declared: “America and our friends will meet this threat with every method at our disposal. We will discover and destroy sleeper cells. We will track terrorist movements, trace their communications, disrupt their funding, and take their network apart, piece by piece.”³² The mentality that no one really knew how many sleepers existed (and where they could infiltrate from), due to the difficulty in detecting them, exacerbated the hysteria around a perceived threat from operatives pre-positioned in North America. This became part of the collective consciousness and was reinforced as details emerged from the arrests of two suspected al Qaeda sleepers allegedly sent to the United States to participate in attacks: Zacarias Moussaoui and Ali Saleh Kahlal al Marri.³³ Moussaoui arrived in Chicago in February 2001 and was purportedly sent to participate in a second wave of attacks, but there is also evidence that gives credence to the suspicion that he was being primed as a possible pilot for the 9/11 attacks.³⁴ Al Marri arrived in Illinois with his wife and five small children on September 10, 2001 to lay low, conduct surveillance, and await further instructions, but al Qaeda’s plans for him are ultimately unclear.³⁵ The arrests of Moussaoui and al Marri in 2001 stoked immense fears that terrorist sleepers were already here and waiting. With renewed memories of Ressam’s plot, American politicians evoked the narrative that keeping the United States safe demanded perfection. Speaking to this, President Bush concluded: “To stop the enemy, we had to be right 100 percent of the time. To harm us, they had to succeed only once.”³⁶

There were a handful of high-profile “terrorism” cases during President Bush’s first term that were initially trumpeted by the government, only to collapse or be revealed as different than first presented as details later emerged.³⁷ The “Detroit Sleeper Cell” became a cautionary tale of pursuing terrorism cases too zealously, as serious flaws in the case revealed what was once considered evidence of sinister intentions to be no more than a vacation home movie and a mentally ill man’s doodle of a map.³⁸ There was no evidence to suggest the so-called “Lackawanna Six” was a sleeper cell, but they came to embody whatever ominous act doomcasters could dream up.³⁹ However, the idea that they would have acted if it were not for the quick work of the government stuck and the case became a “showpiece” for the Bush administration’s counter-terror policies.⁴⁰ Monitoring and arresting members of sleeper cells in the United States became the FBI’s top priority after 9/11 and when critics question the FBI’s grasp on the threat, officials countered with cells broken up in Detroit and Lackawanna.⁴¹ The reality was that by 2005, US government efforts did not identify any “true ‘sleeper’ agents’ in the U.S.”⁴² However, there was little solace in a lack of evidence of sleeper activity. Even if the individuals in these cases were not sleepers, the perception that they were persisted, which became stronger than the reality.

Fears of a second wave transcended the border and were heightened in December 2002 when CSIS arrested refugee Mohamed Harkat, a pizza deliveryman in Ottawa with alleged close ties to a senior member of al Qaeda and suspected member of the Islamic Army Group. CSIS posited that Harkat came to Canada as a “sleeper” for terrorist organizations and it issued a Security Certificate built on secret evidence, which allowed authorities to detain him without charge, with the purpose of removing him from Canada for reasons of national security.⁴³ Harkat has maintained that he will face torture or death if he returns to Algeria and he has spent years in custody, under house arrest, and was detained without trial.⁴⁴ Canadian authorities insist that Harkat continues to pose a threat.⁴⁵ Like other tactics used in the “War on Terror” domestically and internationally, the use of Security Certificates⁴⁶ have drawn both speculation and condemnation on issues of constitutionality, denials of due process, and extended periods of delayed reviews resulting in cruel and unusual punishment.⁴⁷ Harmonizing policies, the “Ressam Effect”, and the search for sleepers after 9/11 meant Canadian acceptance of American standards and this gained a great deal of momentum from the perception of a serious security problem on the US-Canada border.⁴⁸

A Shift to “Homegrown Terrorism”

While al Qaeda may have had an interest in infiltrating sleepers after 9/11, the environment in which they operated changed drastically in the years following the attacks. In addition to North American Muslims’ widespread rejection of violent extremism, the nature of counterterrorism measures to combat al Qaeda, increased foreign and domestic investigative powers and intelligence capabilities (including domestic surveillance that sought to root out an enemy within),⁴⁹ influenced how and where terrorists operated. The onslaught in Afghanistan crippled al Qaeda’s base, severely weakened direction from its leadership, and the organization lost its singular role in the co-ordination of international terror.⁵⁰ That is not to say that al Qaeda did not want to stage another attack on the scale of 9/11, but as Peter Bergen points out, “intent is not the same thing as capability.”⁵¹ Security sweeps and detentions in North America left al Qaeda with the perception that it was difficult to operate there (more difficult than it actually was) and they found it easier to go after western forces in Iraq.⁵² Richard Clarke explains that “They stopped going after the foreign enemy in the ‘far abroad.’ We came to them, so they went after us over there.”⁵³ The occupation of Iraq in 2003 has been credited with almost singlehandedly rescuing the jihadi movement.⁵⁴ Lawrence Wright explains that “bin Laden’s progeny have spread through the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, controlling far more territory in the aggregate than at any time before 9/11.”⁵⁵ The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) rose out of the chaos of the American invasion of Iraq and this “savage offspring” has expanded far beyond what bin Laden had envisioned.⁵⁶ ISIS was expelled from al Qaeda in 2014 and overcame its former partner and eventual rival, first in battle and then “as the world pre-eminent jihadist group in reach and recruitment.”⁵⁷ Residents or nationals of Western countries have been drawn to the conflict in Syria and Iraq and co-ordinated attacks in places such as Paris and Brussels, involving groups of returnees, have painfully underscored the deadly relevance of foreign fighters returning from the conflict zone.⁵⁸ The threat posed by returnees was an adaptation of the sleeper threat and prolonged suspicions of enemies within, especially when paired with reports of ISIS sleepers used in local battles abroad.⁵⁹

Jihadi terrorists have adapted and capitalized on the swell of angry radicals in the west who are inspired by the very counter-terrorism actions aimed to root out their muses. The FBI report leaked in 2005 concluded that “instead of actual sleeper agents, lying in wait, al Qaeda may rely on disaffected Americans or other sympathizers, who may pick easier, softer targets such as shopping malls.”⁶⁰ This

was indeed a strategy that al Qaeda, its affiliates, and other terrorist groups adopted after 9/11 when many countries became inhospitable to “traditional” terrorist operatives and networks became more fluid, independent, and unpredictable.⁶¹ The Madrid bombings on March 11, 2004 and the London bombings on July 7, 2005 demonstrated that the threat posed by al Qaeda had changed from 9/11 to one that was sustained by extremists inspired and motivated by, rather than instructed or directed by, al Qaeda.⁶² In 2008 Marc Sageman wrote about a “bottom-up process of small local groups joining a violent global social movement, connected virtually via the Internet, results in a fluid, rapidly adaptive, and difficult to eradicate network of terrorists: the leaderless jihad.”⁶³ According to one study, in the 10 years after 9/11, the majority of the global violent extremist plots or attacks in the West came from groups or individuals with no significant connection to any foreign terrorist organization (64 per cent).⁶⁴ Loner incidents represented almost half of the homegrown plots/attacks (48 per cent) and these became more common at the end of the 2000s with 70 per cent in the last two years.⁶⁵

The perpetrators of deadly attacks, like those in San Bernardino, Orlando, Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, and Ottawa, had no operational connections to terrorist groups except through online propaganda. Bruce Hoffman credits the terrorists’ exploitation of communications technologies that “must surely factor into the astonishing longevity of many contemporary terrorist groups.”⁶⁶ Terrorists self-radicalizing is a myth and David C. Hofmann argues that the “lone-actor” moniker is misleading, as most terrorists “do not radicalize, plan, and execute their plans in social, ideological, or operational isolation”.⁶⁷ Ramon Spaaij and Mark Hamm place lone-actor terrorism “within the broader context of the individual’s personal history, social relations, and political or religious struggles.”⁶⁸ They explain that “A degree of external social influence is often employed during the terrorist attack cycle, notably at the level of ideological formation (online and/or offline) communication with outsiders, including engagement with extremist materials or ‘terrorist PR.’”⁶⁹ The heavy emphasis on monitoring Muslim communities after 9/11 was intertwined with a troublingly simplistic model of radicalization that undermined efforts to build relationships with Muslim communities and jeopardized broader counterterrorism agendas.⁷⁰

After 9/11, North American security reacted and evolved but, as Wright points out, “Fighting terror is an expensive and clumsy business.”⁷¹ According to Martha Crenshaw, “The tendency to oversimplify what is an extraordinarily complex phenomenon is still very much with us, especially with policymakers. People want to see terrorism through one prism. Or to see it in binary terms: It is either the work of evil fanatics or of misguided youth. The messy reality is hard to deal with.”⁷² While the terrorists adjusted their model to the environmental shifts, North American officials were slow to adapt to the changing threat realities and move beyond viewing the threat through the sleeper prism. Al Qaeda’s use of independent actors dates back to the 1990s and the organization had long valued agents in place. After 9/11, their operational concept was able to adapt to lone actors and homegrown terrorists aided by the growth of connectivity, social media, and motivating factors internationally and domestically, particularly the implications of the “War on Terror” with its expansive objectives. Propagated threat exaggerations, including depictions of an “Islamist fifth column in America”⁷³, and chasing the zeitgeist shaped the way governments, the media, and the public interpreted terror threats in the years immediately following 9/11, even as evidence has revealed a remarkably small terrorist presence in North America. This hindered an appreciation of the shifting terror threat in the mid-2000s and it took longer to appreciate the homegrown threat because of the focus on finding al Qaeda sleepers imbedded in North America. For example, FBI Director Robert Mueller observed in

2005 that “the lesson of things like London and Madrid is: You don’t wait until the cell becomes operational because if you wait until the fuse is lit, you’re waiting too long ... A sleeper cell can become operational in the blink of an eye.”⁷⁴ A fixation on sleepers led to a misallocation of resources and less effective counterterrorism after 9/11 with an over-militarized approach espoused by the invasion of Iraq that brought the “far enemy” near. The effectiveness of torture, so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques”, human rights violations, illegal detentions, and the war in Iraq became partisan talking points and fuelled the “War on Terror” while simultaneously inspiring and recruiting terrorists.

Implications of North American Perceptions of Sleepers

Sleeper concerns largely moved out of the mainstream by the mid-2000s with the shift to home-grown threats however, officials and the media repeatedly connected attacks and thwarted plots in the years after 9/11 to “Islamic terrorism” or an “al Qaeda plot” and this continued to perpetuate the perception that the threat was cohesive and terrorists were influencing not only terrorist operatives, but now North Americans from within. Homegrown terrorists are not sleepers or even “nappers” associated directly to an organizational hierarchy. However, they likewise operate from within and reactions to this evolved threat continued to promote idea that individuals radicalized at home, or returning from fighting abroad, were agents in place due to an interconnected world and they were capable of striking within North America. The fact that sleepers, by their nature, are often told to wait years before being called upon to attack helped sustain the idea that terrorist sleepers could still be a threat long after 9/11. As information was revealed after 9/11 about al Qaeda’s penchant for patience and secrecy, many believed that a terrorist organization well-organized and disciplined enough to successfully attack America in such a catastrophic way would certainly have agents lying in wait until security measures eased. In its efforts to root out suspected “sleepers” at home, law enforcement, particularly the FBI, began to use sting operations after 9/11.⁷⁵ Officials insisted that sting operations were essential to uncovering and preventing terror attacks, but the Department of Justice “often leveled lesser charges against terrorist suspects to preemptively squelch potential attacks.”⁷⁶ The arrests and convictions of suspects set up in sting operations fed what Sageman says was “a vicious cycle: the convictions are taken as proof that this inflated threat to national security exists, which leads to the search of ever more suspects in a self-fulfilling prophecy, a process that soldiers call a ‘self-licking ice-cream’.”⁷⁷ The vast majority of defendants “posed no real threat of violence because they had no capability or realistic hope of carrying out an attack.”⁷⁸ The result was an inflation of the terrorist threat to the homeland, which fuelled popular hysteria.⁷⁹

The perception persisted in the 2010s during the Syrian civil war that terrorist sleepers could infiltrate North America through the refugee system. Although counter-terrorism practitioners largely agree that this is highly unlikely and a misrepresentation of the threat, the manner in which Canada’s Syrian refugee plan in 2015 singled out the acceptance of women, children, and families was partially rooted in the prolonged fear of sleepers. One source explained “that to deal with some ongoing concerns around security, unaccompanied men seeking asylum would not be part of the program.”⁸⁰ According to the Washington Post in 2017, in the United States “The concern about dangerous young men has been with us for a while” and the article quotes several politicians voicing “the American concern that young Muslim men pose security threats.”⁸¹ According to one study, “media portrayals of immigrants and refugees that highlight potential threats to members of the host society cause the dehumanization of these groups” and the association is that they may be terror-

ists.⁸² This dehumanization involves the denial of full humanness to others and is an extreme reaction to members of other groups, removing them from considerations of how to treat other humans.⁸³

The concept of terrorists as “foreign” or “other” has persisted throughout history and this intersects with the search for sleepers to contribute to a “Muslimization” of terrorism after 9/11. Perceptions and portrayals of a threat from within either closely or loosely connected to jihadi terrorist organizations have persistently connected the threat to Muslims and the terms “sleeper” and “terrorist” became inextricably linked to Islam. This perception has permeated society, culture, and politics and has led to discriminatory immigration policies, suspicions of refugees, travels bans, biased legislation provisions, law enforcement misconduct, and defamation of Muslims and Arabs by public figures and in the media – all under the guise of effective counterterrorism. Rhetoric after 9/11 framed the fight against al Qaeda as a “Clash of Civilizations” – the West vs. Islam – with Muslims in North America as a potential terrorist Fifth Column in our midst. The threat posed by al Qaeda, ISIS, and those inspired by their ideologies has framed the way North America has understood and labelled terrorists for twenty years. Islamophobia is on the rise in North America and a deep-seated racism that targeted Muslims long before 9/11 (dating back to the 7th century) has been emboldened by the idea that there are terrorists within.⁸⁴ Polls indicate that 30 percent of Canadians believe Muslims follow Shaira law, not Canadian law and half of American adults say Islam is not part of mainstream society.⁸⁵ US President Donald Trump’s anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments and policies and his forthright and indirect support of the far right’s dangerous motives, rhetoric, and actions have brought prejudice into the mainstream.⁸⁶ In 2015, Trump called for a “total and complete shutdown” of the entry of Muslims into the United States and in 2017 he suspended the entry of refugees and temporarily suspended immigration from several predominately Muslim countries to keep out “radical Islamic terrorists” in what became known as the “Muslim Ban.”⁸⁷ The growth of the far-right politically, especially during President Trump’s tenure, has dangerously muddled the interplay between racism, extremism, and conspiracy and legitimate political discourse in America. The Muslimization of terrorism has paralleled a rise in hate directed against Muslims with police-reported hate crimes directed against Muslims up by 151 percent between 2016 and 2017 in Canada.⁸⁸ Furthermore the same study found that more than a quarter of Canadians think it has become “more acceptable”, over the past five years, to be prejudiced against Muslims and Arabs.⁸⁹ In America, anti-Muslim hate crimes rose 67 percent from 2014 to 2015 and again another 19 percent from 2015 to 2016, easily surpassing the modern peak reached in 2001.⁹⁰

The current threat from al Qaeda and ISIS is real and deeply imbedded in local causes and grievances around the world, but as the threat from other ideologically affiliated groups emerge, the framework we use to compartmentalize and understand terrorist threats needs adapt to be inclusive. While North America has followed a largely jihadi-centric threat narrative, this is changing as terrorism motivated by xenophobia, misogyny, anti-authority, and other ideologically-motivated grievances increases and the threat landscape continues to shift. 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 further amplifies discord and energizes right-wing extremists.⁹¹ According to the 2020 Global Terrorism Index, “Far-right terrorism has increased substantially” in the West with a 709 percent increase in deaths from far-right motivated terrorism over the last five years.⁹² Although this is not a new phenomenon, there has been an increase in frequency and lethality with of violence with international connections from what one United Nations report refers to as “a shifting, com-

plex and overlapping milieu of individuals, groups and movements (online and offline) espousing different but related ideologies often linked by hatred and racism toward minorities, xenophobia, islamophobia or anti-Semitism.⁹³ In March 2021, FBI Director Christopher Wray testified before Congress that in the United States, the top threat from domestic violent extremism “continues to be those we identify as racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists...specifically those who advocate for the superiority of the white race.”⁹⁴ Covid-19 has provided “the perfect storm for the spread of misinformation” with its inherent and persistent uncertainty causing anxiety and vulnerability which has fuelled prejudice and hate against minority groups.⁹⁵ According to Turan Kayaoglu, “Covid-19 has also laid bare pre-pandemic structures of Islamophobia” which exacerbate the demonization of Muslims.⁹⁶ Kayaoglu emphasizes that fighting the virus and fighting racism are not parallel struggles and policies designed to tackle Covid-19 are inextricably linked to curbing the spread of hate.⁹⁷

Perceptions of “what is terrorism?” shape how the reality of the threat is understood, and some North Americans are beginning to reckon with their conceptualization of terrorism, but this will be a slow and difficult process rooted in systemic racism. In February 2021 Canada added four ideologically motivated violent extremist groups, including the Proud Boys, to its Terrorist Entity Listings. These four groups joined two Neo-Nazi groups added in June 2020. In response to threats made against a downtown Toronto-area mosque in October 2020, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said “Islamophobia and hate have no place in our country...We must do more to counter hate and we will.”⁹⁸ In stark contrast to his predecessor sympathetically telling domestic terrorists at the Capitol on January 6, 2021 “We love you, you’re very special”, US President Joseph Biden addressed “a rise in political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism” in his inaugural address two weeks later and vowed that “we must confront and we will defeat.” Who we define as “terrorists” has symbolic, rhetorical, political, and cultural implications and there is an inherent inequality in the application of the label sustained by systemic racism and exacerbated by the sleeper concept. Acknowledging who are terrorists in rhetoric and in practice will take a sustained and intentional effort.

Conclusion

In an age of anxiety after the 9/11 attacks, the sleeper threat and its legacy has shaped North American society, culture, and politics. The novelty of sleepers and the dread of consecutive waves of attacks contributed to an excess of imagination and perpetuated myths of al Qaeda’s capacity to use sleepers with Canadian border vulnerabilities. This perception obscured reality, promoted an excess of imagination regarding threats, affected threat calculations fixated on the sleeper threat, and aided in politicizing counter-terrorism efforts. The idea of sleepers evokes fear and fear is politicized. This has been co-opted to oversimplify an extraordinarily complex phenomenon: that “Islamic terrorists” could be living among us. Although the terrorist threat shifted around 2005 to homegrown plots and attacks, an exaggerated concern about sleepers further sustained the narrative that terrorists operating within are a threat to North America. Over the last twenty years this has contributed to an enduring scrutiny of Muslims and Islam and with the spread of disinformation, Muslims have been blamed for societal ills more broadly since they have been dehumanized as threats. Hate and prejudice in the form of Islamophobia is a dangerous and concerning threat. This is inflamed by racist attitudes, the espoused ideology of violent white supremacists and other ideologically motivated individuals and groups, as well as the social polarization, distrust, and fear that have become uncomfortably mainstream. The Muslimization of terrorism is inextricable from systemic racism and its implications are powerful. This has shaped bi-national per-

ceptions and security policies, increased defence spending and involvement overseas, targeted Muslims, resulting in infringements to civil liberties, and sustained the sinister notion of an enemy within.

End Notes

1. This al Qaeda translation of methodology was based on the development of their own systems of operational security, as outlined in training manuals, which included many borrowed tactics from other terrorist organizations and guerilla warfare units. A review of The Manchester Manual and other al Qaeda training materials by this author indicates that there is no evidence to suggest that al Qaeda had an interest in using sleepers in the classic Russian espionage sense of long-term dormancy and deep cover. Instead, the picture that emerges is that al Qaeda had an interest in deploying operatives who had sufficient security awareness to avoid detection by authorities. This work is informed by this author's Ph.D. dissertation: *Perception vs Reality: The Idea of Al Qaeda Sleepers as a Threat to American National Security*, Doctor of Philosophy, Department of History at the University of Toronto, 2017.
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3. This chapter defines North America as the United States-Canada bi-lateral relationship. The fluidity of the terrorist sleeper threat has also affected the United States, Canada, and Mexico tri-lateral relationship, especially under the Trump administration and terminology around "Mexican terrorists". Due to the scope of this chapter, it will be limited to focus on North America as defined by the United States-Canada relationship.
4. Several operatives have been accused as sleepers, but the FBI confirmed in 2005 that no true sleepers had been discovered in the United States and Mohamed Harkat has only been accused to be a sleeper in Canada – there is no public evidence indicating that he was a true agent and there are concerns that information or evidence tainted by torture has been used to form the basis of Security Certificates, See: "Secret FBI Report Questions Al Qaeda Capabilities", ABC News, 9 March 2005, Available Online: <https://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Investigation/story?id=566425&page=1> and Canadian Civil Liberties Association, "Report to the UN Committee Against Torture, 48th Session, May 2012", April 2012, Available Online: <https://ccla.org/cclanewsitewp-content/uploads/2015/05/FI-NAL-CCLA-UNCAT-MAY-2012.pdf>, p.10.
5. The 9/11 Commission Report. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004, p.339; Marc Sageman discusses an "excess of imagination" in Sageman, Marc, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), ebook Loc: 302.

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8. Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama Bin Laden*, (New York: The Free Press, 2001), p.140. According to Bergen, "Concerns about an attack on the Space Needle led Seattle officials to cancel its millennium celebrations."
9. The 9/11 Commission Report. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004, p.179 and "Ahmed Ressay's Millennium Plot". PBS Frontline. October 2001. Available Online: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/trail/inside/cron.html>
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11. Stephen Handelman, "The Ressay Effect", *Time International*, Vol. 158, Issue 3, 23 July, 2001, p.22.
12. "Overview of the Enemy", Staff Statement No. 15, National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, Presented at the Twelfth Public Hearing on 16 June 2004, Available Online: http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/staff_statements/staff_statement_15.pdf, p.9.and 9/11 Commission Report, p.177.
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17. "Outline of the 9/11 Plot", Staff Statement No. 16, National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Presented at the Twelfth Public Hearing on 16 June 2004, Available Online: http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/staff_statements/staff_statement_16.pdf, p.3 and Undated FBI Presentation on the 9/11 Hijackers. Records of the The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, RG 148: Team 1 Files, Box 32 Retrieved on 11 September 2012.

18. Peppered through their movements are reports (many gathered after the attacks) of strange behaviour that made the men stand out, see: "Annotated Timeline of the 9/11 Hijackers for Researchers, various, 5/13/02, compiled from published sources", Records of The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, RG 148: Team 1A, Box 58, Retrieved on 13 September 2012.
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20. Dana Priest and DeNeen L. Brown, "Sleeper Cell' Contacts Are Revealed Canada", *The Washington Post*, 25 December 2002, Available Online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/12/25/sleeper-cell-contacts-are-revealed-canada/ad831ddc-8d21-4b65-867c-7d5cd3a-860da/>
21. Priest and Brown, Available Online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/12/25/sleeper-cell-contacts-are-revealed-canada/ad831ddc-8d21-4b65-867c-7d5cd3a-860da/>
22. Eldridge et al., "9/11 and Terrorist Travel", Staff Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 25 August 2004, Available Online: https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/staff_statements/911_TerrTrav_Monograph.pdf, p.100. Another example of attempted terrorist entry is Gazi Ibrahim Abu Mezer, who committed serial immigration fraud during his planning to destroy the Atlantic Avenue subway in Brooklyn in 1997 and was arrested on his third illegal entry to the United States at the northwest border with Canada, see p.52 above; Timmerman, "Canadian border open to terrorists...", accessed online; Priest and Brown, Available Online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/12/25/sleeper-cell-contacts-are-revealed-canada/ad831ddc-8d21-4b65-867c-7d5cd3a860da/>; and Mark Clayton and Gail Russell Chaddock, "Terrorists aided by a leaky US-Canada line", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 September 2001, Available Online: <https://www.csmonitor.com/2001/0919/p3s1-woam.htmls>
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32. George W. Bush, "Address at the Citadel". Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush, 2001-2008. 11 December 2001, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf, p.93.

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internet searches. See: sources above

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38. Eric Lichtblau, "The Demise and Afterlife of the 'Detroit Sleeper Cell' Case", *The New York Times*. 18 November 2013, Available Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/18/booming/the-demise-and-afterlife-of-the-detroit-sleeper-cell-case.html>

39. Dina Temple-Raston, *The Jihad Next Door: The Lackawanna Six and Rough Justice in the Age of Terror*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), p.184.

40. Temple-Raston, p.184 and Matthew Purdy and Lowell Bergman, "Where the Trail Led: Between Evidence and Suspicion; Unclear Danger: Inside the Lackawanna Terror Case", *The New York Times*, 12 October 2003. Available Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/12/nyregion/12LACK.html?pagewanted=all>

41. Priest and Brown, Available Online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/12/25/sleeper-cell-contacts-are-revealed-canada/ad831ddc-8d21-4b65-867c-7d5cd3a-860da/>

42. "Secret FBI Report Questions Al Qaeda Capabilities", Available Online: <https://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Investigation/story?id=566425&page=1>

43. *Canada (Citizenship and Immigration) v. Harkat*, 2014, SCC 37, [2014] 2 S.C.R. 33. Available Online: https://decisions.scc-csc.ca/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/13643/index.do?site_preference=normal&pedisable=false&alternateloale=en; According to David Harris, although they go by different names, "Instruments in the nature of security certificates are a commonplace of national security throughout the world" and they "frequently offer more severe conditions on those subject to them than anything we see in Canada." See: Harris, David discussion in "Security Certificates", *The Globe and Mail*, 15 June 2006, Available Online: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/security-certificates/article1100955/>

44. Leslie MacKinnon, "Mohamed Harkat security certificate upheld by top court", *CBC News*, 14 May 2014, Available Online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/mohamed-harkat-security-certificate-upheld-by-top-court-1.2642459>

45. Jim Bronskill, "Terror suspect Mohamed Harkat poses low risk of violence, psychiatrist tells hearing", *The Toronto Star*, 17 November 2017, Available Online: <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/11/17/terror-suspect-mohamed-harkat-poses-low-risk-of-violence-psychiatrist-tells-hearing.html>

46. Security Certificates have been used to detain and impose sanctions against five men of Arab descent with alleged ties to terrorist activities in Canada since 2001 and all five have argued that information procured from torture was used against them, see: Canadian Civil Liberties Association, "Report to the UN Committee Against Torture", Available Online: <https://ccla.org/cclanewsites/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FINAL-CCLA-UNCAT-MAY-2012.pdf>, p.9 and 10; Those detained include: Mahmoud Jaballah, Adil Charkaoui, Hassan Almrei, Mohamed Zeki Mahjoub, and Mohamed Harkat. Charkaoui's Certificate was found to be void in 2009 and in 2011 a court overturned the Security Certificate against Hassan Almrei after it found that the Certificate "was based on outdated and faulty information, and that CSIS had failed to disclose exculpatory evidence."

47. Canadian Civil Liberties Association, "Report to the UN Committee Against Torture", p.9.

48. Whitaker, "Ontario-Vermont Border'...", p.55.

49. One such domestic intelligence program that emphasizes the suspicion of the enemy within was PRISM, the National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance program which began in 2007 and was revealed by leaked documents from Edward Snowden in 2013. The "two-hop ability", and later inclusion of persons suspected of national security in the collection of metadata makes it unclear who was targeted. Allegations of domestic spying and collection of metadata by the Communications Security Establishment Canada also inspired a great deal of confusion about the precise nature of surveillance as both Canada and the United States sought to uproot an enemy within, using signals intelligence as a tool to do so. See: Barton Gellman and Laura Poitras, "U.S., British intelligence mining data from nine U.S. Internet companies in broad secret program", The Washington Post, 7 June 2013, Available Online: https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/us-intelligence-mining-data-from-nine-us-internet-companies-in-broad-secret-program/2013/06/06/3a0c0da8-cebf-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497_story.html and "CSEC's collection of metadata shows ability to 'track everyone'", CBC News, 4 February 2014, Available Online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/csec-s-collection-of-metadata-shows-ability-to-track-everyone-1.2522916>

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59. Wright, *The Terror Years*, p.313.

60. "Secret FBI Report Questions...", <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Investigation/story?id=566425&page=1>

61. Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p.vii.

62. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Next Attack: The Failure of the War on Terror and A Strategy for Getting It Right*, (New York: Times Books, 2006), p.6.

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76. Bjelopera, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41780.pdf>, p.20; According to Garrett Graff, "of the 417 terrorism indictments in the five years after 9/11 ... only 143 of the individuals were actually indicted on specific terrorism charges; the rest were the result of what then-Attorney General Ashcroft called the 'spitting-on-the-sidewalk' approach: driver's license fraud, marriage fraud, wire fraud, immigration violations, and the myriad of other lesser charges that served to disrupt potential plots and get suspects off the street." See: Garrett M. Graff, *The Threat Matrix: The FBI at War*, New York: Little Brown, 2011, p.420-421.
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85. Sean Simpson, Racism, IPSOS and Global News, April 2019, Available Online: https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-05/ipsos_global_news_-_racism_-_2019.pdf; In 2019 59 percent continued to see Muslims as the most likely targets of racism, which is consistent with a 2017 IPSOS poll and a sharp rise from 2005 when 38 percent saw Muslims as the most likely targets (still the highest percentage among the victim minorities); "How the U.S. general public views Muslims and Islam", Pew Research Center, 26 July 2017, Available Online: <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/how-the-u-s-general-public-views-muslims-and-islam/> ; While the share of Americans linking Islam with violence has edged lower recently, it is prominent along partisan lines, as one poll indicates that Republicans view Muslims far less positively than most other major religious groups: 70 percent of Republicans say Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence, compared to 26 percent of Democrats who say the same.
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