



THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL EXTREMISM ON CANADA: ADDRESSING THE LOCAL THREAT

Date: May 15, 2025

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KEY EVENTS

On May 15, 2025, Mr. Mubin Shaikh presented “The Impact of Global Extremism on Canada: Addressing the Local Threat” for the CASIS Vancouver May 2025 Digital Roundtable. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the ways in which foreign conflicts are influencing extremism within Canada, and how current mitigation efforts remain insufficient given the speed and scope of online radicalization and disinformation.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Global conflicts are fueling domestic tensions in Canada by impacting diaspora communities, enabling the spread of disinformation online, and increasing the involvement of youth in extremist ideologies. Additionally, foreign actors operating within Canada amplify domestic extremism by spreading disinformation, leveraging diasporic tensions, and undermining public trust in Canadian institutions. These outcomes are achieved through cyber-attacks, covert networks, and asymmetric tactics. Mr. Shaikh emphasized the continued global threat from ISIS and Al-Qaeda and the limits of current counter-extremism frameworks in addressing digital and ideological threats.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has not significantly contributed to extremist threats in Canada, however, incidents such as the removal of Ukrainian flags from cars show how geopolitical tensions abroad can still provoke extreme actions domestically. Mr. Shaikh noted that the related malicious cyber activities and

hacking by Russian actors highlights the potential for future destabilizing operations in Western countries, including Canada.

Foreign interference from Iran and China poses a threat to Canadian national security through cyber operations, covert activities, and intimidation of diaspora communities. Iran has been linked to asymmetric operations including cyberattacks and the use of organized criminal groups, for example, Iran's use of a biker gang to assassinate an individual within Canada. Meanwhile, Mr. Shaikh described China's operations as even more covert, such as the presence of unofficial police stations in Canada which are run by the CCP and aim to monitor and intimidate diaspora communities. These activities were not linked to violence but remain a key concern for domestic security.

Key findings from the Global Terrorism Index included the Islamic State's presence in 22 countries and a 63% increase in terrorist attacks in Western countries. Teenagers are becoming a major demographic in Islamic State-linked arrests. Although Canada has not been directly targeted, Mr. Shaikh cautioned about the presence of extremist networks. ISIS and Al-Qaeda continue to present a global threat with rising activity in Africa and their use of sleeper cells to plan future attacks. Mr. Shaikh noted that Africa, particularly the Sahel region, is now the epicentre of terrorism, accounting for over half of global terrorism deaths.

The Israel-Palestine conflict, specifically the events of October 7, 2023, has intensified ideological polarization and contributed to rising antisemitism and Islamophobia. He argued that while much attention is placed on October 7, the broader historical context is often overlooked. The conflict sparked ideological divides in Canada, leading to an increase in both antisemitic and Islamophobic acts of violence. Additionally, Mr. Shaikh noted that the spread of radical ideologies, including revolutionary and Marxist-leaning views, overlap with perceptions of the conflict.

Though the India-Pakistan conflict has not led to direct extremism in Canada, escalating tensions within diaspora communities pose a growing risk of radicalization. Mr. Shaikh pointed to a growing number of protests globally, online hostility, and attacks on Hindu temples as signs of increasing extremism. Mr. Shaikh stressed that radicalization begins when communities support their own while showing hostility toward an "opposing other."

Mr. Shaikh outlined Canada's current mitigation strategies across three levels: prevention, intervention, and reaction,

Canada's current mitigation strategies, which encompass prevention, intervention, and reaction, fall short in addressing rapidly evolving digital threats and ideological shifts. Prevention involves the collaboration of governmental, civil society, and private sector initiatives that focus on counter-radicalization at the societal level. Intervention involves de-radicalization programs targeting individuals already on the path to extremism. Reaction is conducted through punitive measures that involve law enforcement and operational responses for high-risk actors. While these frameworks exist, Mr. Shaikh emphasized the need for more proactive measures.

The implementation of adaptive and inclusive counter-extremism efforts is necessary to mitigate increasing radicalization in Canada caused by conflicts abroad. The Five Eyes intelligence alliance remains strong, and ongoing cooperation was described as essential to counter shared threats. Mr. Shaikh also discussed gaps in current legislation around hate crimes and the need for clearer definitions and consistent enforcement. Emphasis was placed on the importance of meaningful community engagement to address inter-group tensions within Canada's multicultural society. The role of social media monitoring was noted for its value in intelligence gathering, despite concerns about surveillance and censorship.

Extremist organizations such as ISIS and similar entities remain active and continue to explore opportunities to carry out harmful actions. Meanwhile, nihilistic and malevolent online communities that promote self-harm, abuse, and exploitative practices—such as sextortion and the incitement of youth to engage in self-injury or violence—pose a persistent and growing threat. Identity-based polarization along ethnic, cultural, religious, and ideological lines is intensifying, marked by a decline in empathy and a lack of desire for understanding. These dynamics foster adversarial in-group/out-group mentalities that hinder social cohesion. Efforts by states and social media platforms to counter hate speech, violent extremism, and disinformation are increasingly strained. While many institutions have established harm prevention and content moderation mechanisms, the volume and sophistication of harmful content—exacerbated by AI-generated disinformation—continue to outpace current mitigation capabilities.

Question & Answer Period

Can you elaborate on social media monitoring and what's being used or how it has changed in the past 3 years as more sites have cut off their API access or changed direction entirely (X & Reddit particularly).

The most significant change Mr. Shaikh observed is the rise of AI. It is no longer just about collecting data; it is now about extracting meaning from it. Companies are employing sentiment analysis to understand how grievances and ideology interact, and how that combination can influence behavior. The focus has shifted from simply asking, "How do we monetize this data?" to "How do we influence behavior through that data?" Some of these techniques are also being explored within military contexts. While it's unclear what social media companies ultimately plan to do with this information, these advancements are fundamentally transforming the way social media data is approached.

How have the processes of radicalisation changed over the past decade? What role do online spaces play in amplifying and encouraging processes of radicalisation?

In 2015, when ISIS declared a caliphate, they recruited on Facebook and Twitter. No one was doing anything about it. Eventually, social media companies started responding, and while not perfect, deplatforming efforts were effective in some ways. They pushed extremists off mainstream platforms, but that drove them to smaller, more encrypted ones. Those platforms aren't impenetrable, but they're harder to track. We're seeing more of that shift now. Another huge issue is the echo chambers these platforms create. When people are in spaces where their views are constantly reinforced, it becomes much easier for someone on the path to violence to follow through. Some companies are trying to detect and intervene, but others openly say they won't, because for them it's all about making money. And that's how we end up with places full of drug trafficking, child sex predators, terrorists, all unchecked because these companies don't have a sense of responsibility.

What are the most overlooked early signs of radicalization, especially in Western contexts?

There are no set predictors. It's all based on probabilities. One might spot a cluster of behaviours that suggest someone is becoming radicalized, but that doesn't guarantee violence. However, there is usually a progression, people

become more extreme over time. The two big things Mr. Shaikh focuses on are ideology and grievances. One without the other doesn't usually lead to action, but together, they create that gateway. Mr. Shaikh used the example of the U.S. in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or Vietnam. Despite everything that happened, people from those countries do not plan attacks against Americans. Why? Because there's no ideology pushing them to do so. But when there is an ideology, like neo-Nazism, there's a high probability of encouraging violent thoughts and behaviours. It's not just about what people believe, it's about what they are willing to do. Radicalization has both cognitive and behavioural elements.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Global conflicts like Israel-Palestine and India-Pakistan are impacting Canadian society, leading to hate crimes, polarization, and diaspora tensions.
- Iran and China pose ongoing threats through covert operations, cyberattacks, and foreign interference in Canadian society.
- ISIS and Al-Qaeda remain active globally, with Africa as a hotspot and youth increasingly involved in radical activity through online platforms.
- Social media and AI-driven disinformation are increasing radicalization, with extremists shifting to encrypted platforms.
- Canada's current counter-extremism strategies, while structured, need to adapt faster to evolving digital threats and ideological shifts.

FURTHER READING

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