

TORONTO STAR

Why security shouldn't be left to security services

Michelle Shephard, who spent year tracking Daesh's foreign members — "Generation 9/11" — analyzes the strategies Canada needs to counter terrorist threats.

By Michelle Shephard
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The depressing reality first.

Our terror years since Sept. 11, 2001, will continue for more to come. Syria's slaughter and other regional conflicts will persist. The refugee crisis is beyond staggering.

In early 2015 when I pitched my Atkinson Fellowship "[Generation 9/11](#)" to study why young Canadians are attracted to groups such as Daesh, the situation was grim. Much has deteriorated since and we cannot ignore how it is all related.

No politician should talk about counterterrorism efforts without also condemning state terrorism. Bashar Assad's regime, with Russia's support, is committing war crimes against Syrian civilians with impunity. Meanwhile groups like Daesh (also known as ISIS or ISIL) push their narrative of a world war against Muslims, even as they kill thousands of Muslims in their own war.

Every country needs to help ease the refugee crisis. If Daesh was able to recruit from the

disenfranchised of Generation 9/11, what will become of this next generation? In early 2012, I travelled with videographer Randy Risling to report on the thousands of children fleeing Syria's war. We called our series "[Childhood Interrupted.](#)" Those children, who were in refugee camps in Turkey, are now teenagers and adults. Their childhood wasn't just interrupted, but lost. If we ignore their futures we not only turn our backs on a humanitarian crisis, but we have handed terrorists a rich hunting ground for recruits.

But now some perspective.

The threat of terrorism in North America is greatly exaggerated compared to other crimes or societal problems. In the U.S., hit by terrible attacks as in San Bernardino and Orlando, terrorism accounts for far below 1 per cent of homicides.

And this cycle of terrorism will eventually end. Daesh has lost territory and popularity. How Canada reacts is critical because succumbing to racist retaliation only

benefits the terrorists hoping to sow division.

Islamophobia is one sad legacy of 9/11 and remains part of the lives of young Muslims today, sometimes in ways they may not realize.

Jasmine Zine, a professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, conducted a study asking young people what effect 9/11 had on them. Most quickly replied they were unaffected. “And then you’d start to ask them other questions — so you’re with MSA (Muslim Student Association), what is your group doing? They would say, ‘Well, we were going to go play paintball up north but decided not to because didn’t want to be seen as a terrorist cell. Or, we don’t play the violent video games at the concourse at the university.’ For them, that’s the new normal.”

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has moved Canada past the divisive and vitriolic politics that existed when I began the Atkinson a year ago.

But when it comes to national security, the Liberals have done little but talk. Treading carefully is a good idea. Standing still is not.

The Atkinson Fellowship is intended to focus on public policy, and in the case of my work, suggesting ways Canada can work in the field of countering violent extremism (CVE). My research took me to Tunisia, Turkey, Somalia, Germany and Denmark — all facing problems greater than ours.

The research all points to one factor I kept hearing worldwide. No effort — not counter-propaganda or “deradicalization” — will work without an intense, one-on-one approach with mentors who have credibility with vulnerable youths. It may sound obvious, yet very few countries have invested in this type of work.

Accepting this premise means accepting that this problem cannot and should not be left to security services alone. If anything, their roles in law enforcement and intelligence should be narrowed so they can focus on extreme cases.

This is essentially what the Liberals promised. But seven months since funding was allocated for the Office of the Community Outreach and Counter-radicalization Co-ordinator, the public safety minister has yet to name a co-ordinator. If this is the speed with which the office will work, the prognosis is not good.

This office can co-ordinate existing provincial, municipal or grassroots programs or fund new ones. These programs need to be supported (with legal protections for counsellors and religious mentors) but must be community-driven and local; the government touch should be light.

No model is perfect but there are lessons from Aarhus, Denmark, where a four-year-old program has shown modest success. There, a small number of community mentors and a citywide network provide the belonging and purpose to replace what Daesh once offered. As the city’s police superintendent told me, “it’s not rocket science.”

This program helps those who have sought to fight abroad, and also “returnees.” Having a plan to deal with those returning from the self-proclaimed Islamic State is urgent. A battle for Mosul, Iraq, is underway and Raqqa, in Syria, will eventually fall.

Where will survivors go? Canada is not prepared. “That will become the next national security issue,” Herman Okomba-Debarice, the director of Montreal’s Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to

Violence, said in an interview. His high-profile centre is well funded, but he says all he can tell parents is if their children return they could go to jail.

Some should. Canadians must be prosecuted for their crimes in the name of Daesh's brutal regime.

But there cannot be a one-size-fits-all policy. The RCMP will have difficulty building a case against most who went abroad. And some will say they deeply regret going. Okomba-Debarice has interviewed families and friends of some of these youths, as have I.

Somalia, an unlikely place for "soft" measures on terrorism, has had to deal with the defection of hundreds of members Al Shabab, the East Africa Al Qaeda affiliate. The country offered amnesty to foreign fighters and low-level local members. This program, run by Somali-born Canadians, allows Shabab defectors to convince others to surrender and slowly reintegrates them with their families and communities.

Nothing is more effective in combating the terrorist narrative than a reality check from disillusioned former members.

Privately, the RCMP and CSIS say they are overwhelmed, and I have sympathy for their position. Not everybody can be monitored, or should be. Aaron Driver appeared to be moving on until he was shot dead, armed with an improvised explosive device, in Strathroy, Ont. Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, who stormed Parliament Hill in 2014, was low on a list of Canadians that may pose a threat.

But if the federal agencies are grappling with the workload, why waste resources on the case of the B.C. couple John Nuttall and Amanda Korody? In [throwing out the charges](#) against the former drug addicts, a

judge blasted the RCMP for "abuse of power" in entrapping them. B.C. Supreme Court Justice Catherine Bruce said in her July verdict: "They were clearly overzealous and acted on the assumption that there were no limits to what was acceptable when investigating terrorism.

"We do not need the police to create more (terrorists) out of marginalized people who have neither the capacity nor sufficient motivation to do it themselves."

This case cries for an examination of RCMP misconduct, but also stresses the need to bolster community services that could have helped Nuttall and Korody before they fell prey to terrorist ideology (or a police sting). Zehaf-Bibeau was so desperate for help that he robbed a McDonald's with a stick so he could go back to jail and clean up.

A history of mental health issues, addictions or criminal activity is present in many but not all cases of North Americans drawn to Daesh. Some recruits could have been helped sooner.

If more community programs were available to those alienated from society, or showing signs of drifting toward violent groups, it would bolster the criticism that additional spying powers or new criminal offences provided in Bill C-51 are superfluous.

Take, for instance, the criminalization of advocating or promoting "terrorism in general." (I could go to jail for articles quoting terrorists, as could a teen who posts them on Facebook.) This broad definition not only threatens free speech, but is questionable as a deterrent. Hate speech is already a crime, and it is illegal to counsel anyone to commit a terrorism offence.

This new law would push more people into the criminal system, while diverting

resources from law enforcement agencies as they prosecute Daesh cheerleaders and trolls.

The private companies that profit from the popularity of social media sites and apps should also be held to account. Thomas Hegghammer, a Norwegian researcher who specializes in online propaganda, told me the most egregious Daesh material violates the terms of use for sites such as Twitter or Facebook. Twitter, pressed in the last couple of years, began shutting down accounts that violated their terms. It had a profound impact on how easily Daesh could spread its message.

“We’re trying to put out fires with buckets of water when you have a 10-inch pipe of gasoline fueling the bonfire,” Hegghammer said. “We’re discussing all these super-expensive rehabilitation projects, counter-radicalization programs that are labour-intensive, while leaving on all this pervasive propaganda.

“We’re never going to be able to eradicate completely but we should make it less available.”

Of the dozens of interviews in the last year, the one that gave me the most hope took place in a Toronto coffee shop. We’ll call him Hassan, as a court order protects his name.

Hassan is 27 but was 17 when the “Toronto 18” terrorism case made headlines in June 2006. One of four youths charged, he spent time in jail before his trial and signed a peace bond. His participation in the plot was pretty much limited to running around a camp as an aspiring jihadi.

I tracked down members of the Toronto 18 to see if their experiences were different from what young people might feel today.

“The whole ISIS thing as opposed to what was going on back then, I think it’s a lot different,” Hassan says. “There’s a lot more involvement of the Internet. I don’t know what it would have taken me to tip over to the point and leave (for Syria). You’re talking about giving up your family and your life, and most likely you’re going to die.” He stops, trying to remember his teenage self that wanted “Rome to burn,” a cry against the West that Daesh uses today.

Hassan sees the differences, but as we talked, I saw the similarities. He was angry, felt out of place, got into drinking and petty crime and tried to straighten out by embracing a strict form of Islam. He felt out of place in Toronto and in his parents’ Afghan culture. He became enraged watching online videos and protested Canada’s role in Afghanistan. When he sought advice from the mosque he was turned away — they feared attracting law enforcement. So he went online, finding Al Qaeda propaganda and some likeminded friends.

That’s a portrait of so many North American Daesh recruits.

Hassan felt unfairly targeted after his arrest and spent years on anti-depressants. He had to catch up and get his high school degree. About five years ago, a close friend got cancer and died quickly. He began drinking again. He contemplated suicide.

But a series of events turned him around. He credits one day in particular. He was outside a mall, smoking, wearing a traditional Muslim robe, missing his friend, stressed about debt. A Toronto police officer approached.

Hassan was angry, believing he was profiled. “But then the cop, he goes, ‘What’s bothering you man?’ And for some reason I

just opened up,” he told me. At first his tone was combative, but as the cop just listened, Hassan calmed down.

“He wasn’t a brown cop. He wasn’t a Muslim cop. He was a Caucasian cop who just listened and I saw that as a sign from God. Before I used to think ‘us and them’ and it was no longer that; it was just us. I had a lot of bad experiences before (with police) but that one changed it all.”

Those 45 minutes helped Hassan take off the cloak of victimhood.

Today he still feels the sting of Islamophobia at times but has learned to confront it peacefully. He has a girlfriend, produces leather goods and built a construction business, employing Muslims and non-Muslims. “I found I like to make money. I like business. I like being creative. But at the same time I will never not care about my religion or what’s going on in the world.”

But he no longer thinks of violence. “The biggest part for me was that I was just angry,” he says. “I had to pass the phase of saying that I’m a victim and just start manning up.”

***About the series:** The Atkinson Fellowship awards a seasoned Canadian journalist with the opportunity to pursue a year-long investigation into a current policy issue. This award is a collaborative project of the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich family and the Toronto Star.*

***Michelle Shephard**, the Star’s national security correspondent and author, travelled to a half-dozen countries and interviewed foreign fighters, security experts, policy makers and religious leaders for this year’s series. This is the*

final column in her series “Generation 9/11” that explored the issue of Daesh’s foreign members and how Canada and the world should respond. Read the stories at www.thestar.com/news/atkinsonseries/generation911