



## **WHERE IS TERRORISM GOING AND ARE CANADIAN AGENCIES PREPARED TO CONFRONT IT?**

**Date:** November 22, 2022

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On November 22, 2022, Mr. Phil Gurski, President and Chief Executive Officer of Borealis Threat and Risk Consulting Ltd., presented on *Disruption and National Security*. 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 difficulties of the current definition of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremist groups (IMVE), as well as the need for Canada's security agencies to shift focus from IMVE back to Islamist terrorist organizations. Mr. Gurski also discussed the importance of maintaining public trust through oversight and improved communication with the public, as well as improving technology and understanding context when assessing data sourced from social media platforms.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

#### **Presentation**

Mr. Gurski asserted that the current challenges to assessing security threats were the allocation of resources and the broad definitions and categories used to identify threats such as extremism or terrorist attacks. Mr. Gurski argued that due to the number of Islamist extremist attacks globally and the recruitment of Canadian citizens, Canada's intelligence services need to shift their focus to address this security threat.

#### **Question & Answer Period**

During the question-and-answer period, Mr. Gurski stressed the importance of security agencies maintaining public trust, establishing better communication

with the public, continuing oversight for national security agencies, as well as improving technologies and developing a better understanding of context when assessing data sourced from social media platforms.

## BACKGROUND

### Presentation

Mr. Gurski expressed that Canada's national security agencies' main focus is on IMVE but that it needs to be shifted to Islamist terrorist organizations. Globally, terrorist attacks conducted by Islamist extremist groups are extremely prevalent compared to other ideologically motivated attacks.

However, according to Mr. Gurski, the current government seems reluctant to allocate more resources to counter Islamist extremist threats. In addition, the current economic uncertainty indicates that more resources might not be added to national security agencies, which means that resources are being, or will be, shifted away from other more plausible threats to help focus on IMVE.

Mr. Gurski also stated that approximately 200 Canadian citizens have travelled overseas to join Islamist terrorist organizations since 2010. Considering the global context, where a large majority of terrorist attacks are Islamist extremist terrorist attacks, Mr. Gurski argued that the resources given to counter IMVE are not warranted and would be better appropriated to combating threats associated with Islamist extremist organizations.

Mr. Gurski further stated that the broad definition of IMVE is a significant difficulty for security agencies because it adds confusion to the identification of extremism and the threats correlated with the expanded definition. The changes to the definition of security threats broadens the scope that security agencies need to address, increasing the different types of groups that may fall within this definition, further making the definition of IMVEs unclear. Mr. Gurski pointed out that the current definition includes several different concepts and ideologies, and this lack of clarity makes the threats associated with IMVE also unclear. This leads to allocating more resources to assess data and unlikely threats, taking resources away from countering more probable threats, such as Islamist terrorist organizations.

## Question & Answer Period

When asked whether too much oversight affects the work of Canada's national security agency, Mr. Gurski asserted that while operations are affected because resources are used to enable the oversight mechanisms, it is necessary to maintain the public's trust and ensure democratic liberties are respected.

When asked about potentially expanding or narrowing the mandate of the national security agency, Mr. Gurski warned that expanding the mandate can lead to an erosion of public trust—the public belief that national security agencies already have too much power. Additionally, to expand or narrow the mandate certain terms—such as lawful dissent—must be defined, which then begs the question of who will set the definition?

When asked about communication with the public, Mr. Gurski stressed that national security agencies need to improve communication with the public in order to maintain and improve trust between the two. Communicating with the public gives an opportunity for security agencies to illustrate the responsibilities and tasks of that agency. Mr. Gurski acknowledged that, while national security agencies cannot divulge certain information, the successes that these agencies have achieved should be announced and celebrated to demonstrate to the public that the work of these agencies enhances the citizens' safety.

When discussing social media platforms, Mr. Gurski stated that improvements to technology and a better understanding of human nature on the internet needs to occur before data can efficiently be analyzed for security threats. Currently, it is impossible to monitor the vast amount of data produced, which largely consists of threats by individuals who have no intention in following through. However, there are still individuals who post legitimate threats, making the improvements to monitoring social media more important.

## KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

### Presentation

- The main focus of national security agencies needs to be shifted from IMVEs back to Islamist extremist groups, as terrorist attacks by such groups remain prevalent.
- The security threats associated with IMVE are unclear due to the broad definition of the term, which leads to a waste of resources in assessing and analyzing threats that are less probable.

- Considering that Canadian citizens are still being recruited by Islamist terrorist organizations, resources to counter IMVE might be better appropriated to combating threats associated with Islamist extremist organizations.

### Question & Answer Period

- Currently, it is impossible to monitor all the data sourced from social media platforms; however, security agencies cannot fail to recognize valid threats, so a greater understanding of human nature regarding posting empty threats versus genuine threats needs to be implemented.
- While resources are used to enable oversight of Canada's national security agency, it is an important part in maintaining public trust and ensuring democratic liberties are not encroached upon.
- A way to improve the public's trust in national security agencies is to engage in communication, such as publicizing the successes of the agencies.



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