

Phil Gurski. *The Threat from Within. Recognizing Al-Qaeda-Inspired Radicalization and Terrorism in the West.*

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Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

This book is the result of 15 years of study of Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism. Its author, Phil Gurski, recently retired from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). The volume is meant as a primer on understanding the terrorism threat in Canada and the West. The goal, however, is not purely academic; the main focus is on practice and detection of AQ-inspired terrorism in the West. Phil Gurski rightly observes that the religious nature of Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism is often downplayed; he therefore devotes a whole chapter to explain the key Islamic concepts used by Al-Qaeda in its radicalisation efforts. The author emphasizes that “Muslim communities and leaders cannot pretend that these terms are not being used or simply dismiss their ‘misuse’ as wrong, hoping that they will just go away” (p.71). This is an important observation, as politicians but also academic observers have often hesitate to make such a link between terrorism and religion for fear of being accused of Islamophobia.

There are about one million Muslims in Canada. One opinion poll conducted in 2007 among a sample of them concluded that 5 percent held that the performance of terrorists acts in Canada, as planned by the so-called “Toronto 18” was “fully justified”, 7 percent thought that it was “partly justified” while a further 15 percent were uncertain, answering “It depends”. That translates into, respectively, 50,000, 70,000 and 150,000 individuals or 270,000 in the aggregate – or 27 percent of the Muslim population of Canada (p.13). That is the pool of Muslims terrorist recruiters can try to (further) radicalise. Canada is, in this respect, not unique—sympathy and even support for anti-Western terrorism is astonishingly widespread among young Muslims in Western diasporas. While most Muslims are unlikely to put deeds by their words, it creates a problem for intelligence services to detect in time the few who become violently extremist and start preparing acts of terrorism. What are the predictive indicators to look out for? Phil Gurski presents a list of twelve “tangible, observable behaviors and attitudes of violent radicalisation” as a tool for analysts (pp.75-92,161):

1. Sudden increase in intolerant religiosity/change in behavior;
2. Rejection of different interpretations of Islam;
3. Rejection of /intolerance for, non-Muslims;
4. Rejection of Western ways;
5. Rejection of Western policies (domestic, military, foreign, social, etc.);
6. Association with like-minded people/ changes in social circles;
7. Obsession with Jihadi and violent-extremist websites and social media;
8. Obsession with/ Belief in, the common narrative;
9. Desire to travel to conflict zones/Obsession with foreign conflicts;
10. Obsession with violent jihad;
11. Obsession with martyrdom;

12. Obsession with End-Times.

In chapter 3, the author discusses these indicators in detail as these apply to 17 cases of foiled and completed attacks in Canada, participation in foreign terrorist plots, as well as foreign fighter experiences (at least 130 Canadians went abroad for jihad in Syria and other places). These 17 cases Gurski describes in the fourth chapter—where converts to Islam and immigrants and sons of Muslim immigrants figure prominently, with difficult youth, drug abuse, a crime record and occasionally mental health issues surfacing. While there are commonalities between the cases, Gurski notes “...that there is no single process of radicalisation. There is also no model predictive of who will move from advocating violent extremism to engaging in violent action” (p.122).

In the fifth chapter the author discusses soft (counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation) and hard (security- and law enforcement) responses to radicalisation toward terrorist violence. He admits that “In the war of ideas, we are being beaten badly” (p.138). While he concedes that Al-Qaeda’s single narrative “...should not be seen as unassailable” (p.139), he asks, “If an individual chooses to fight and die because they [sic] believe that God has asked them to do so, what human authority or agency can convince them otherwise?” (ibid.) Faith is blind and true believer terrorists generally have “closed minds” that make them “fact-resistant”. Yet some fanatical extremists have returned to reason and humanism. One of the approaches described in Gurski’s book refers to a Canadian government funded project which seeks to produce original counter-narrative films to tell stories of former violent extremists.

The volume contains several appendices, including one featuring a *Radicalisation-to-Violence Matrix* (pp.163-165) that further details the twelve indicators cited above. While the focus of the book is on Canada, many of its observations and insights also apply to other Western countries with Muslim diasporas. The volume is lucidly written, clearly structured, and carries the authority of someone who has been benefiting from decades of all-source access to classified intelligence information. Phil Gurski is not, as so many others, blowing up the threat of jihadist terrorism to the West. However, he is right on spot in identifying Islam-based religious extremism as being at the heart of the problem.

About the reviewer: Alex P. Schmid is editor-in-chief of *Perspectives on Terrorism* and former co-editor of *Terrorism and Political Violence*.