

FEBRUARY 8, 2021

Sending a Message: Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremist Groups and Canadian Terrorist Entity Listings

Dr. Shannon Nash

NAADSN Post-doctoral Fellow and Network Manager

On Wednesday, February 3, Public Safety Canada Minister Bill Blair [announced](#) that the federal government has placed thirteen new groups on the *Criminal Code* list of terrorist entities: three al Qaeda affiliates, five Daesh affiliates, Hizbul Mujahideen, and notably four ideologically motivated violent extremist (IMVE) groups¹ – [Atomwaffen Division](#), [the Base](#), [the Russian Imperial Movement](#), and [the Proud Boys](#). Based on their actions, these groups meet the [legal threshold](#) for listing: (a) the entity has knowingly carried out, attempted to carry out, participated in, or facilitated a terrorist activity; or (b) the entity has knowingly acted on behalf of, at the direction of, or in association with such an entity. Such acts do not need to be carried out in Canada for a group to be listed. The *Criminal Code* is replete with tools that law enforcement and the intelligence service can use as a result of listing an entity, including severe penalties for people and organizations that deal with property or finances of a listed entity, denial or revocation of charitable status if connected to an entity, and denial of entry to Canada of persons found to be associated with a listed entity. The listing also helps facilitate the removal of an entity's content online.²

The listing of these groups is a step forward for equality under the terrorism label and consistency in the way we frame and compartmentalize “terrorist” threats, and further represents a show of leadership among countries grappling with how to confront the threat posed by IMVE, particularly racially motivated violence. [I have argued](#) that the threat posed by al Qaeda, Daesh, and those inspired by their ideologies has framed the way Canada has understood and labelled terrorism for almost twenty years, but as the threat from other ideologically affiliated groups emerges, the framework we use to compartmentalize and understand terrorists needs to be adapted. There has been a reluctance to list IMVE groups that are present and dangerous here and elsewhere. The newly listed IMVE groups, as well as [Blood & Honour](#) and [Combat 18](#) (listed in 2019), are associated with right-wing extremism, white supremacist groups, or neo-Nazi groups. [The Soufan Center](#) draws comparisons between these groups and Salafi-jihadist organizations, like Daesh and al Qaeda, as they have “built internationally recognizable brands, which are capable of radicalizing individuals across the globe and inspiring acts of racially and ethnically motivated violence.”

Adding six IMVE groups to the list demonstrates the government's willingness to adapt to new and emerging security threats, and this was ushered along by the currents of international events (resulting in new evidence) and social attitudes. The January 6 terrorist attack on the U.S. Capitol not only demonstrated how intertwined

IMVE groups are in the political and social fabric, but also in the threat matrix, as court documents [indicate that planning](#) for the attack took place among members of the Proud Boys. [According to Minister Blair](#), the Proud Boys would have been designated a terrorist entity regardless of the January attack, as the process for listing and gathering intelligence began years ago. However, he acknowledged that a significant escalation towards violence of a number of organizations in the weeks and months leading up to January 6 and the attack provided “a trove of new evidence.” This escalation paired with strong political will, as Members of Parliament voted unanimously on a motion [calling on the government to](#) “use all available tools to address the proliferation of white supremacists and hate groups starting with the immediately [sic] designating the Proud Boys as a terrorist entity.”

Lessons painfully learned in the years after 9/11 should be considered as the terrorist threat changes and new threats emerge. After 9/11, “terrorist” became inextricably linked to Islam and this led to the problem of a Muslimization of terrorism in Canada. While the new listings are a step in the right direction, [some have raised concern](#) about who might get caught in the dragnet of these groups as the list of terrorist entities grows and diversifies. In addition, the listing process is conducted outside of the public eye and there is a lack of transparency to how a group is designated. Some unclassified transparency could provide greater clarity to the public on how to understand national security threats and inform a broader discourse not only on threats and response, but on systemic issues of racism, identity, politics, and the intersection of the social, political, and legal realms. It is a tall, but important, order to further understand the relationship between terrorism, IMVE, and mainstream political motivations. Extremism and conspiracy, both domestically informed and shaped by international politics, must be parsed and rejected from legitimate political discourse. Although there is a worry about setting precedent, the unified, bi-partisan support for identifying IMVE groups as terrorist entities helps to close any political divide that could feed into a movement. Unity against the threat, and an understanding of why and how IMVE poses a threat to Canadian national security with fact-based evidence, will help starve the political divide that fuels conspiracy theories.

[Minister Blair pointed out](#) that the listing is a legal process, not a political one, based on evidence with significant legal implications. However, the “terrorism” label and who we define as “terrorists” also has symbolic, rhetorical, political, and cultural implications. The definition of terrorism does not need to change in order to classify and list IMVE terrorist entities; rather our perception of who we frame as “us” and “them” must be challenged. The federal government is taking necessary steps to reorient how we conceptualize terrorism after nearly twenty years of following a largely jihadi-centric threat narrative (see Figure 1). This is overdue, but essential, as the [2020 Global Terrorism Index](#) indicates that “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. The pandemic has provided an opportunity for IMVE groups to fuel racist narratives and hate speech and for conspiracy theories to thrive online. By listing groups like the Proud Boys, and by positioning IMVE entities alongside al Qaeda and Daesh and their affiliates, as well as other terrorist groups, the federal government is sending the message domestically and internationally that ideologically motivated violent extremism, specifically xenophobic violence, has no place in Canada.

