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Chair

Mr. Kevin Sorenson

Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone.

This is meeting 60 of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security on Wednesday, November 21, 2012.

Today our committee is continuing our study of Bill S-7, An Act to amend the Criminal Code, the Canada Evidence Act and the Security of Information Act.

On our first panel testifying today we will hear from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. Michel Coulombe is the deputy director of operations.

As well, we have Monik Beauregard, director of the Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre.

I've explained it to you folks already. Today there's been a concurrence motion that has been moved in the House, and it could be that the bells could start ringing as early as ten minutes to four, but it may be after that as well. Our intent is that when the bells start, we will conclude this aspect of the first hour. Depending on timing, we may come back or we may not. I rather doubt it. My sense is that we may not, but we'll wait and see what the timing is.

Please don't let that deter you from your statement. We have looked forward to this study and to your statement, so the floor is yours.

Mr. Michel Coulombe (Deputy Director of Operations, Canadian Security Intelligence Service): Thank you.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, good afternoon.

I'm pleased to be here today to discuss matters related to Bill S-7, the combatting terrorism act.

As you are probably aware, the director of CSIS spoke to Bill S-7 at the Senate anti-terrorism committee last April. As the bill has largely remained the same, what he said at the time remains valid, and as such, I will keep my comments related to the bill short.

[Translation]

Bill S-7 aims to provide the justice system and law enforcement with better tools to respond to terrorist activity that reaches a criminal threshold. Given that the service has no law enforcement mandate, we would not directly have recourse to the provisions envisioned by the bill. That said, as a member of the broader national security community, we are certainly supportive of any additional

tools that will help our law enforcement partners better confront terrorism.

The amendments related to section 38 of the Canada Evidence Act recognize the importance of protecting sensitive information from public disclosure. Mr. Chair, CSIS welcomes these measures as they help prevent our operations, sources, and tradecraft from being compromised.

[English]

Mr. Chair, I will now turn from the details of the bill to the threat it seeks to address.

As our public report, recently tabled in the House of Commons, stated, "the greatest threat to Canada's national security remains terrorism".

In Canada, terrorism has been associated with a variety of radical political and religious movements, so today, the most salient threat is that posed by violent Islamic extremism. This is a global movement and is represented by a variety of groups. Obviously, al-Qaeda and its affiliates are the best known and are of the most concern to Canadian and allied security services. However, in recent years, what we in the intelligence community called the al-Qaeda core has been significantly impacted. The death of Osama bin Laden and much of his al-Qaeda senior leadership has significantly weakened the organization.

• (1535)

[Translation]

Despite these successes, there remain concerning global trends, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. Recent events in North Africa and Syria have provided an opening for Al Qaeda-affiliated groups. This was dramatically revealed in the murders of American Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other personnel in Benghazi, Libya, at the hands of terrorists this past September.

Events in Syria are no less concerning. Syria presents many difficulties, particularly in separating those elements that will, over the longer term, contribute to regional stability from those that may engage in terrorism. Canada and our allies have welcomed the recent establishment of a more comprehensive Syrian opposition authority. There remain, however, Al Qaeda-affiliated forces operating throughout Syria.

[English]

It is CSIS's assessment that the situation in Syria will remain chaotic for the foreseeable future, and this will continue to offer a permissive environment for terrorist activities. As such, al-Qaeda affiliates will likely increase their presence and operations in the country. The military and intelligence support provided by Hezbollah and Iran to the Assad regime further complicates this conflict.

[Translation]

Supporting democratic transitions in the countries of the so-called Arab Spring, while limiting Al Qaeda and its affiliates' space to operate, will be an immense policy challenge for Canada, our allies, and the region.

Mr. Chair, switching now to the domestic sphere, CSIS continues to investigate hundreds of persons involved in terrorism-related activity that threatens Canada and our allies. The service assesses that there are approximately 50 Canadians—many in their early twenties—who have travelled or attempted to travel from Canada to Somalia, the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal areas, Syria and Yemen to engage in terrorism-related activities in recent years. The spectre of these young people returning to Canada—with combat experience and thoroughly radicalized views—is a serious national security concern.

[English]

Any aid Bill S-7 can provide to alleviate and prevent some of this activity would be welcome. It should be pointed out that criminal sanctions are not generally a deterrent to terrorists who are motivated by extremist ideology, but as Bill S-7 would provide another tool to law enforcement, we are certainly supportive.

Mr. Chair, underpinning domestic terrorism is the radicalization of individuals to violent, extremist ideology, a phenomenon that requires greater study. In this regard, I would like to draw to the committee's attention an element of our recent public report that highlighted some conclusions of a CSIS study on radicalization in Canada. The study is an important milestone and one of the first of its kind in Canada. While much of the report is classified, I can share some of the conclusions for the committee's edification.

[Translation]

The study does not identify a predictable pattern or linear process for radicalization. Domestic extremists come from diverse backgrounds, age brackets, income levels, and education levels. All this to say, that there is simply no “terrorist type”.

However, several drivers do appear with some frequency, including significant feelings of injustice against western governments, societies, and ways of life. As well, there is the conviction that the Muslim world is under attack and requires defending through the use of violent jihad. These views are often promulgated through Internet propaganda, conspiracy theories, and charismatic leaders.

[English]

Mr. Chair, the required policy response is not obvious. Although these findings do suggest that undermining this narrative could aid in preventing radicalization, whether to, how to, and who would do this

remain questions for policy-makers, the government, and parliamentarians such as you.

Mr. Chair, I am reaching the end of my allotted time. I will cede the floor to Ms. Beauregard and would then be pleased to deal with these and other issues in questions from the committee.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to Madame Beauregard.

[Translation]

Mrs. Monik Beauregard (Director, Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre): Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for your invitation to appear before your committee.

I'm pleased to be here today to discuss matters related to Bill S-7, the Combating Terrorism Act, in particular, and the role and mandate of the Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre, ITAC.

• (1540)

[Translation]

Similar to CSIS, the Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre (ITAC) is not an enforcement organization, so the Criminal Code provisions related to traveling overseas to engage in terrorism will not affect our work. I would echo my colleague's comments about the amendments related to protecting sensitive information from public disclosure. That being said, I should make clear that ITAC has no independent ability to collect intelligence. Simply put, unlike CSIS, we have no intelligence officers in the field.

Rather, the primary objective of ITAC is to provide comprehensive and timely terrorist threat assessments for all levels of the Government of Canada with security responsibilities. Our workforce is seconded from across government, thereby representing a wide variety of skill sets and knowledge bases. These individuals bring their knowledge and expertise to ITAC, making it uniquely qualified to analyze terrorist threats against Canadian interests in a way that takes into account the perspectives of all government departments and agencies.

[English]

ITAC acquires information from across the Government of Canada, including the Canada Border Services Agency; CSIS; the Communications Security Establishment Canada; the RCMP; Foreign Affairs and International Trade; CRA; the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre, also known as FINTRAC; the Privy Council Office; Public Works; National Defence; and the Correctional Service of Canada.

Mr. Chair, ITAC threat reports use intelligence and information from various sources and methods to assess this threat. We provide these terrorism threat warnings and assessments in relation to, for example, travel by high-profile officials, high-profile events, and current threat-related activities both in Canada and abroad.

Turning to the threats themselves, I would echo the deputy director's comments. The most serious terrorist threat to Canada remains violent Islamist extremism, although I would be careful to point out that no ideology, religion, or group is immune from violent, extremist elements.

al-Qaeda and its affiliates continue to represent the greatest threat from the Islamist terrorist perspective. These would include, for example, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is known for innovative attack planning; al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which has conducted kidnapping operations from its Sahara safe haven; al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has gained experience during the Iraq insurgency; al-Qaeda core, which, though seriously weakened, remains committed to violent jihad from its Pakistani base; and al-Shabaab, which has a strong territorial base in Somalia and an experienced cadre of foreign fighters.

[Translation]

My position, as Executive Director, is jointly appointed by the National Security Advisor and the director of CSIS. Committee members should also be made aware that ITAC was formed as a result of the events of 9/11. It was created as an organization that would bridge some of the institutional gaps in the Government of Canada.

At the time, you will remember that there was a reasonable fear that the Government of Canada was not sharing information horizontally to the extent it should have. As the final report of the National Commission on the 9/11 terrorist attacks demonstrated, the United States also had very similar concerns. Moreover, there was a

need for an organization to provide greater all-source analysis and context regarding terrorist threats, taking into account the expertise from across the Government of Canada.

[English]

Mr. Chair, clearly the need for cooperation and information sharing across the Government of Canada is vital to our national security. The siloed approach of yesteryear simply does not work, potentially endangering lives and damaging Canadian interests. ITAC prides itself on being an important piece in solving this policy puzzle, thus providing support to the Government of Canada's national counter-terrorism policy.

As I've reached the end of my time, I now look forward to answering the committee's questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: I'm glad you're looking forward to it, because we're looking forward to questioning you. However, although the bells in this place aren't working, the lights are, and we've been notified that there has been a vote called right now.

We are going to suspend. It may not be for as long a time as we had first anticipated. My intention is that we will try to come back immediately following the vote, which will take place at five minutes past four.

We will suspend.

● (1545) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1715)

The Chair: We'll call this meeting to order.

Oh, we don't have quorum.

Since I see no quorum, we are adjourned.

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