

Ottawa shooting doesn't mean extremism has traction, says intelligence expert

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Broadcast: 23/10/2014

Reporter: Leigh Sales

Two attacks by extremists in Canada in one week don't mean the country has 'a significant problem' or that extremism has traction there, according to Canadian intelligence expert Wesley Mark.

Transcript

LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: I was joined earlier by intelligence expert Wesley Wark. He's served on the Canadian Prime Minister's Advisory Council on National Security.

Wesley Wark, what's your first-blush assessment of this incident today?

WESLEY WARK, FMR NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR: Well, I think clearly this was some kind of terrorist attack, and the challenge for Canada, frankly, is it's the second in a week. We've never seen anything like this on Canadian soil. The first attack happened on Monday in Quebec and killed one military officer. Now we have a second attack which may or may not be similar in terms of motivation and style of attack to the Monday one, but bears some similarities. In other words, we seem to be facing two back-to-back attacks conducted by people who were, certainly in the Monday Quebec attack, a kind of home-grown terrorist, a lone actor, a lone wolf, as they're sometimes called. That may also be true for the attack that occurred today. There was earlier speculation that there were multiple gunman involved, which would have raised the sector of a kind of plot conspiracy, something highly organised. It now appears that there were probably only the one gunman, perhaps some accomplices; the police are still investigating that. But the scale of the assault has diminished a little bit with that slightly reassuring news there was probably only one gunman. But other than the name and age of that person we know virtually nothing about him or what might have driven him to this act.

LEIGH SALES: Is it fair to say that the attacks this week are consistent with Islamic State propaganda, instructing acolytes to mount attacks in Western countries against soldiers and police?

WESLEY WARK: Well, I mean, we certainly know that ISIL, the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant, has been propagating this message to its followers and adherents around the world to take the jihadist war beyond Iraq and Syria and attack the Western nations. We've seen a little bit of that activity in European countries. Nothing so far in North America. The attack in Quebec on Monday may have been in some way or another inspired by ISIL propaganda. The Canadian Prime Minister suggested that was the case tonight, but we don't know how much evidence there is for that in reality. Whether the attack today on Parliament Hill and against the soldier on ceremonial duty at the National War Memorial was in any way ISIL-inspired or a product of someone who was self-radicalised and driven on this path by watching that

media propaganda campaign out of the Middle East, we just don't know. It's a possibility that I'm sure the intelligence and security agencies are looking at very closely as we speak.

LEIGH SALES: Is Islamic State making any specific efforts to recruit Canadians or to encourage attacks on Canadian soil?

WESLEY WARK: Well we do know that Canadians have gone to the Middle East to join ISIL. A few of these Canadians have turned up on videos and social media platforms proclaiming their presence and adherence to ISIL and their adherence to the fight. The Government of Canada's given us some broad statistics on the number of Canadians who've gone abroad, not just to Syria and Iraq, to engage in terrorism. The numbers who have returned from Canada - to Canada from having engaged in terrorism, acts of various kinds. But there certainly is, from a Canadian perspective, a problem with Canadians being attracted to the ISIL message and perhaps even joining the cause as foreign fighters.

LEIGH SALES: You say Canadians have fought abroad and returned, what sort of numbers are you talking about?

WESLEY WARK: The numbers we've seen I think are actually rather similar to the numbers that the Australian Government has given with regard to your problem, or potential problem. It's been suggested by the authorities that about 30 Canadians have returned from Syria and from Iraq. Now, of that 30, we don't know how many were kind of hardened terrorist fighters, how many were, if you like, terrorism tourists, as they're sometimes called, how many were facilitators or engaged in other forms of terrorism. So that's all we have is that number, 30, which is hard to set in any kind of context. We don't know whether it represents a rising trend or a declining trend and we don't know whether it'll be sustained.

LEIGH SALES: Does Canada have a problem with radicalised Islamic youth?

WESLEY WARK: I think Canadians would have said up until Monday or today, no, not a significant problem. The answer, I think, still remains: no, we don't have a significant problem. Like all Western countries, there have been on occasion been Canadians, Canadian youth, Canadian male youths in particular, who have sometimes converted to Islam or come out of Muslim communities and embraced this jihadist cause, but they've been very, very small in numbers, and before this week, we've never seen a successful terrorist attack on Canadian soil. So we're trying to grapple with the scale of this problem and we're asking ourselves this question: does this mean there's a deeper problem than we thought? We'll have to see what the government security, intelligence agencies say about that. But I think the common-sense wisdom at the moment would be that despite these two attacks, there isn't a kind of hidden problem in Canada with regard to radicalisation and terrorist violence. The general feeling in Canada is that it is a safe and peaceful country and that jihadist terrorism, Islamic extremism doesn't have much, if any, traction.

LEIGH SALES: Given the events of the past week, though, how will that affect Canada's national psyche?

WESLEY WARK: Well, I think people will be in shock and there will be different sort of political views across the spectrum in Canada. It's a big country and very diverse country. Some people no doubt will call for the Government to take stronger measures even if they're not sure what those should be. Others, and I would put myself in this camp, would argue that we have actually a long experience now of over a decade in confronting terrorism

threats, you know, building up law enforcement and intelligence capabilities, constructing what have proved to be quite strong laws and law enforcement procedures to deal with terrorism crimes. And so, this may not be the moment, even if it seems symbolically the moment, to do something drastic. I think we have to take some comfort in the fact that we have been dealing with this problem for some time. It's kind of slipped past our protective mechanisms on these occasions this week, but that does not necessarily mean that the scale of the problem is bigger than we thought or that there are capabilities that we're essentially missing to deal with it.

LEIGH SALES: Wesley Wark, thank you for your time.