

Protecting National Security Takes More Than Just Adding a Group to the Terrorist List

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Newly recruited members of the Houthi terrorist group attend a protest march against the United States and Israel in Sanaa, Yemen, on Feb. 21, 2024. AP Photo/Osamah Abdulrahman



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12/3/2024

Updated: 12/3/2024

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Commentary

In the post 9/11 period, a new tool was made available for the Canadian government in the ill-named “war on terrorism.” It is not as if we had not experienced terrorism before that fateful day (the FLQ crisis in 1970 and the Air India bombing in 1985 are two prescient examples), nor were our security services restrained from investigating terrorist threats prior to the flying of passenger aircraft into buildings in New York and Washington.

What, then, was this new instrument and what purpose did it serve? It

was called “[Listed Terrorist Entities](#)” and was supposedly implemented as “a public means of identifying a group or individual s being associated with terrorism.” While it was not a crime per se to e listed, those who knowingly participated, directly or indirectly, in ny activity of a terrorist group were guilty of an offence.

he original list was not rocket science. Groups such as Al Qaeda (I wrote the first Al Qaeda listing in early 2002 while at CSIS), the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo, and Hezbollah were early listed entities, although in some cases groups were deferred until over a decade later (the Taliban were only listed in 2013 despite the presence of Canadian Armed Forces anti-terrorism units in Afghanistan since 2002).

It is also noteworthy that the listing process was at times very political in nature. Although Public Safety Canada “owned” the list, it is important to point out that the reason for including groups was supposed to be based solely on the input of the country’s security intelligence apparatus. And yet one group would be delisted inexplicably (the anti-Iranian Mujahedin-e-Khalq was removed during the latter years of the Harper government) and another added for blatantly knee-jerk rationales (the Proud Boys were rapidly included in the Trudeau years after the January 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol despite no serious presence or threat in Canada).

I have always been ho-hum about the list as it does not really serve much of a purpose. Yes, it does help in terrorism finance cases (if you are dumb enough to send money to ISIS your action can facilitate legal



pursuit), but it neither mandates CSIS or the RCMP to investigate these entities nor helps them to prioritize their work.

Canada has also dragged its feet on some listings (Samidoun was listed only on Oct. 15 in apparent response to flag-burning demonstrations despite its well-known links to another group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), or seen to be merely following decisions by its allies ([the listing of the Yemeni Houthis](#) a few days ago in the aftermath of the U.S. and UK decisions to do so even though we knew a lot about them beggars disbelief). As to why it took the federal government a quarter century to list Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (June of this year), your guess is as good as mine.

I fear that these very public pronouncements are little more than theatre. By proclaiming from the rooftops that Canada has taken a bold move to place a given group on notice, Canadians can be assured that their leaders take the threat of terrorism very (very, very, very, very...) seriously. This from a government that hasn't taken the China threat seriously, as we have seen ad nauseam in the various reports and inquiries into Chinese election interference and transnational repression against a variety of diasporas in our land. Saying you are all in on national security takes more than a statement by a minister.

It is thus quite obvious that the entire listing process has become yet another government program which few understand or pay attention to. Canada is not directly affected by the Houthis, although these Shia terrorists have inflicted significant damage to international shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. It is hard to imagine what Canada will do to counter Houthi actions in a critical economic zone—it is not as if we have spare warships to send to the region. It is even less clear whether there is any Houthi presence in Canada, or individuals who support these violent extremists.

Having watched the process develop over two and a half decades, I no longer jump up and down and celebrate when another entity joins the list. Maybe I am just jaded, or maybe the whole thing is just window-dressing and pretty well a waste of time and resources.

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