

Diaspora Populations and Security Issues in Host Countries

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This paper will explore the potential challenges posed to host countries by the presence of politically-active diaspora groups, especially those linked to homeland struggles. In doing so, it will address three main sets of questions. First, what kinds of challenges might such groups pose? Second, what sort of factors may shape the nature and intensity of the threat to host country security? Third, and by way of conclusion, what sort of policy elements ought to be included in state responses to these challenges? This paper is largely a catalogue of challenges, determinants, and responses—intended to spark and frame discussion on the topic, rather than offering new empirical evidence, a new analytical perspective, or definitive conclusions.

The paper tends to focus on diaspora groups in Western, industrialized democracies, rather than the security consequence of mass regional refugee flows in the developing world. The term diaspora is far from analytically concise, and the boundaries of “immigrant,” “refugee,” migrant,” and even ethnic community or minority overlap and are intertwined. To reflect this, the concept of “transnational community” has been increasingly used in the scholarly literature. Here, the term diaspora is used interchangeably with that of “transnational community.”

Preliminary Words of Caution

In examining these questions, the author is well aware of the dangers in doing so. By problematizing the security implications of diasporas for host countries, one risks

leaving the impression that diasporas pose a particularly serious security challenge, that liberal immigration or refugee laws are therefore a threat to public safety, and that targeting diaspora communities through racial profiling or other discriminatory measures is an appropriate policy response. In its most extreme form, this kind of discourse feeds the paranoid xenophobia of France's National Front, Austria's Freedom Party, the UK's British National Party, and other similar racist movements.

This author strongly rejects such views. Diasporas have immeasurably enriched host societies throughout human history, in cultural, economic, and myriad other ways. This paper is not the place to recount those contributions, but precisely because of its focus on security implications it is important to keep the broader balance in perspective.

The security implications of diaspora communities for host countries generally relate to their political activities. However, it is important to emphasize at the outset that it is quite reasonable and normal for diasporas to be engaged in political activities, whether locally-focused or linked to their homelands. Such activity is particularly likely when lands of family ethnic origin are themselves caught in the grip of repression, exploitation, and civil violence. Who would deny the right of diaspora South Africans to mobilize against apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s, or of diaspora Chinese to protest the repression of the students of Tianamen Square in the 1990s?

But, it might be suggested, host country tolerance ought to end when and where acts of violence are involved. Take, for example, the following (true) story:

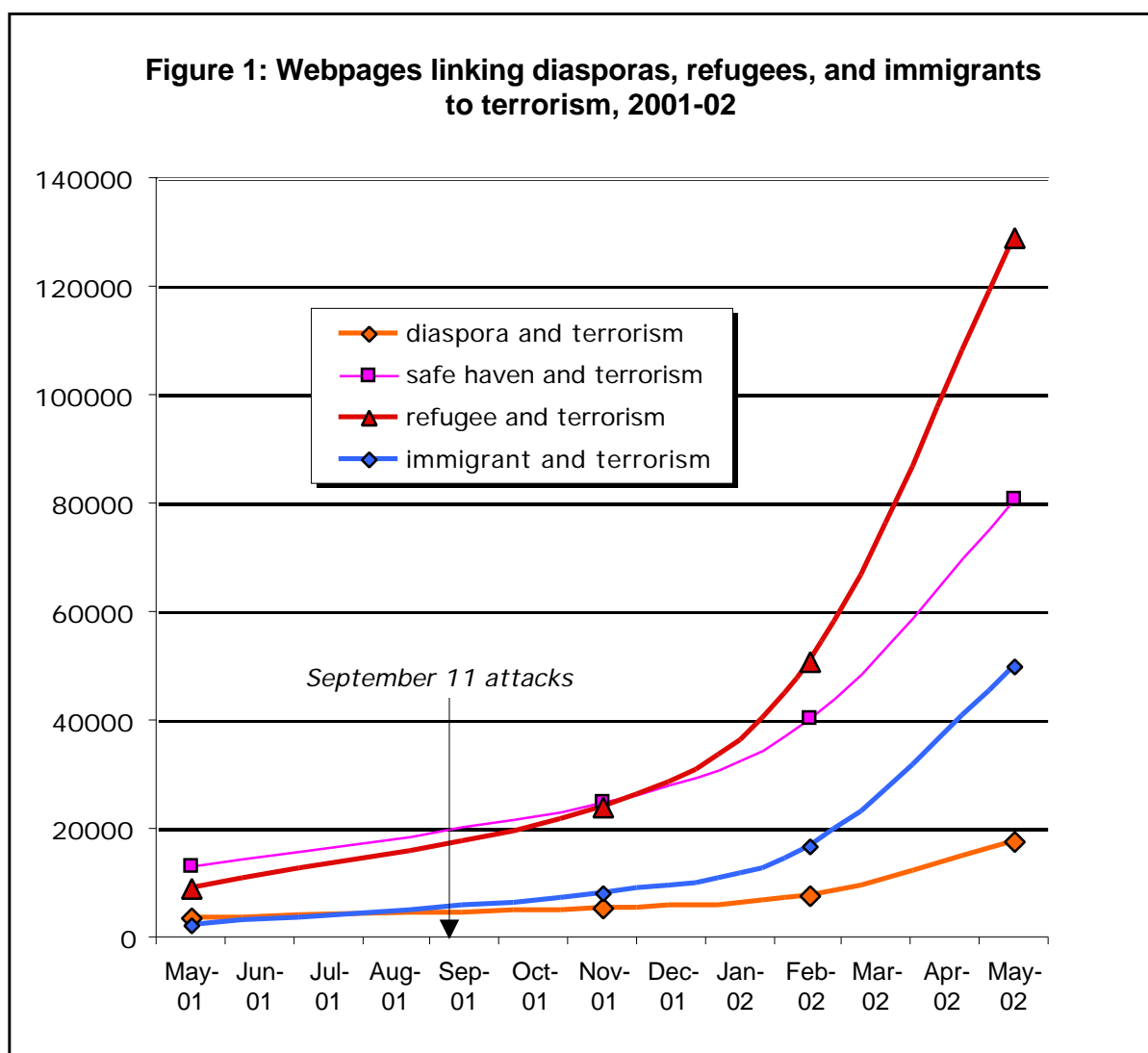
A man—a militant and underground organizer, wanted by the local authorities—flees violence in his homeland. Escaping the security services, he is smuggled aboard a boat to a western country where claims refugee status. Once there, he meets others from homeland, and begins to coordinate with them in support of struggle back home. Funds are raised in the host country to support homeland opposition groups, weapons are acquired, cadres are trained. Linkages are formed with like-minded organizations and foreign intelligence agencies. Diamonds are smuggled to fund the campaign. Criminals are recruited to assist in the struggle. In the homeland, militants—bolstered by this external support—engage in a wave of sabotage, espionage, and assassination....

Kurds working in support of the PKK? Tamils allied to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam? Sikhs seeking an independent Khalistan in the Punjab? Kashmiri militants?

Armenians of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia,, pursuing retribution for past Turkish atrocities? Kosovars of the KLA? Cuban émigrés targeting the regime of Fidel Castro? Palestinian refugees, plotting against Israel?

Actually, the story is one of my grandfather, who in 1940 fled the Netherlands for Britain, and who spent WWII as a Dutch intelligence officer and resistance organizer. It is also the story of my grandmother, who served in the exiled Dutch armed forces. And it is the story of my father, who as a young child smuggled Dutch diamonds to Britain even as he fled the Nazi advance.

In other words, even support for violence does not represent an adequate criteria for either the determination of security challenge nor for judging the appropriateness of diaspora activities. The complexities of the issue hardly need to be underscored here in



the Balkans. Many diaspora groups were active in mobilizing support for the liberation struggles, wars, and terrorism that accompanied the break-up of Yugoslavia. Funds were raised, political mobilization and propaganda undertaken, and some even returned “home” to fight. How much of this represented a security threat, either to host countries, to innocent civilians elsewhere, or to international peace and security more generally? And how much of it did not?

These caveats are particularly important in the post-September 11 world. Since the tragic terrorist attacks against New York and Washington DC, there has been a veritable explosion in the amount of public, media, and policy attention to the potential links between expatriate ethnic groups and national security challenges. This is graphically illustrated in Figure 1, which shows (based on a simple boolean search using the *Google* search engine) the number of web-pages linking the terms “diaspora,” “refugees,” or “immigrant” to the term “terrorism.”

Scholars of transnational communities are rightly alarmed at the ease with which these linkages are made in popular and political discourse. Yet such attention can also be justified. Although almost all of the September 11 hijackers were Saudi citizens who had legally entered the United States through regular channels, al-Qa’ida operatives involved in the attack had been trained and recruited in Afghanistan, and based in Arab expatriate communities in Germany, the UK, France, and elsewhere. Previous, failed al-Qa’ida operations had included cells based in Canada, the Philippines, and other countries. Frequently, operatives made use of locally-recruited sympathizers among diaspora Arabs. In the United States in particular, this soon resulted in widespread calls for tighter immigration, visa, and refugee policies, not only in the US but also in other countries.

Commenting more generally on the challenge of ethnic communities and terrorism, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) has noted:

...proximity to the United States, a common border, large expatriate communities and a healthy economy draw representatives of virtually every terrorist group in the world to this country. The Counter-Terrorism Branch of CSIS is currently investigating more than 50 organizational targets which embody over 350 individual terrorist targets.

A large part of terrorist activity in Canada is related to on-going conflict abroad. Logistical support for terrorist acts in other parts of the world has been provided on

Canadian soil. Funds are raised here to support the purchase and delivery of weapons, enhance combat training and subsidize travel. Ethnic communities are exploited through propaganda, advocacy and disinformation. Canadians with foreign roots are intimidated, coerced and manipulated while people are smuggled, documents forged and crimes committed, all in support of political, geographical and religious conflict abroad. Support networks in Canada have provided terrorists with safe-haven and transit to and from other countries, including the United States.¹

The former chief of strategic planning for the CSIS has gone still further, arguing that:

We need a gigantic cultural shift in this country. We are not used to seeing ourselves at the front line of any major struggle. But there is a war on. It's a global, terrorist-based war that we are all going to be facing, and it is increasingly going to become home here to Canada. We have got to get our laws and our attitudes into line to meet the threat before it's too late. We may need to look at legislation changes. But, above all, all of us have got to be more aware that no matter what kind of emphasis we want to place on multiculturalism and the benefits of diversity, some of those issues open us to struggles that are going on around the world, and that we don't want to have to come home.²

Yet, as noted earlier, it would be a fundamental mistake, both analytically and morally, to overreact. The magnitude of the threat also needs to be placed into perspective: the 350 “individuals” cited by CSIS above represent less than 0.006% of Canada’s more than 6 million foreign-born immigrants, and an even smaller proportion of the even larger number of Canadians with transnational ethnic ties.³

The danger of overreaction is perhaps the strongest reason why the sorts of security issues addressed in this paper ought to be addressed by the scholarly community, and especially by those with expertise in transnational communities. Without such attention, there is a danger that not only will the issue of “security” continue to be problematized in public discourse (with the dangers outlined earlier), but that discourse and responses will be exclusively framed by security establishments and others. To date,

¹ CSIS, “Operation Programmes: Counter-Terrorism,” at http://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/eng/operat/ct_e.html.

² David Harris, quoted in “Is Canada a Safe Haven for Terrorism?” *PBS Frontline*, at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/trail/etc/canada.html>

the transnational community research establishment has devoted very little attention to this issue, however.

Related to this, some conceptual words of caution are also in order, lest they reinforce the tendency to view ethnic communities as intrinsic breeding grounds for national security threats. In this regard, the very terminology used in this paper, while unavoidable, is also problematic. Concepts such as “diaspora,” “host country,” and “homeland” tend to give inadequate weight to the extent to which transnational ethnic groups may be deeply imbedded in their country of residence as fully integrated citizens, especially in multicultural states in which there is no dominant ethnic ethos to define national identity. The existence of so-called “hyphenated” identities—Palestinian-Canadian, for example—does not imply that attachment to the place of family ethnic origin (“homeland”) somehow competes with, or comes at the cost of, attachment to the “host country”. In fact, both may be equally regarded as “homelands,” and the willingness of the latter to accept cultural pluralism among its multi-ethnic citizenry be part of its attraction.

Finally, it is important to note that the national security challenges to host countries arise not only from inappropriate or illegal activities by militant diaspora groups linked to homeland conflict, or from the political-demographic consequences in host societies of a large diaspora presence, but also from the need to protect the legitimate rights of diasporas from external challenges. During the Cold War, East European émigrés supporting democratic reform were the frequent target of communist security agencies. The assassination of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov in London in 1978 was perhaps one of the best-known such cases. During the apartheid era, the activities of both exiled South Africans and others were targeted by South Africa’s Bureau of State Security. For example, Britain’s current (South African-born) Minister of State for Europe, Peter Hain, was an active campaigner against apartheid in the UK in the 1970s. In 1972 was sent a letter bomb that failed to explode. In 1975, he was accused of robbing a British bank (and subsequently acquitted) in what was widely seen as a South African

³ Statistics Canada, based on data at <http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/People/Population/demo25a.htm> and at <http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/People/Population/demo08.htm>

smear operation.⁴ Today, Chinese pro-democracy activists today may be the targets of surveillance from the Chinese intelligence services; India operates active intelligence campaigns against diaspora Sikhs and Kashmiri nationalists; and Israel's Mossad runs world-wide operations focussed against the Palestinian diaspora. While some of these actions might be justified in the names of counter-terrorism, others can be seen as attempts to interfere with the legitimate expression of democratic or nationalist views by (diaspora) citizens of host countries, or attempts to blunt legitimate struggles for self-determination or democratic reform in host countries.

Diasporas and Threats to Host Country Security

The potential challenges to host country security posed by diaspora political activity fall into many categories. These are presented below in approximate order of their potential threat to host country security, although as will soon become evident a precise ranking is impossible.

No Threat/Valued

- *legal involvement in host country domestic politics* by diaspora groups. This certainly ought to be seen as a value, not a threat, by democratic host governments. However, there have been cases where the state or social groups have viewed diaspora (usually refugee) participation in local politics as a form of external interference, or as a challenge to the ethnic status quo. Lebanon is a case in point, where there is strong political resistance to extending full economic and civil rights to Palestinian refugees, despite their presence in that country through four generations and half a century.
- *political mobilization, recruitment, and voluntary fun-raising within the diaspora ethnic community by non-militant organizations* related to homelands and homeland struggles. This too ought to be seen as a valued expression of political rights by the host country, even if it attracts criticism from the homeland state.

⁴ BBC News, "Hain—The Radical Establishment," at

- *advocacy and lobbying efforts by diaspora groups directed at host governments.* Such efforts may seek to influence government policy towards the host country, diaspora political causes, refugee policies, or aid and humanitarian assistance efforts.
- *militant diaspora efforts support by the host government,* for example US support for the Iraqi National Congress or Syrian support for the Kurdish PKK. This is not to say that such actions do not have adverse effects on the national security of homeland countries or regimes (they do) or on international peace and security (they might, whether positive or negative). However, they cannot really be seen as a national security “problem” by host governments, and indeed diaspora militants may be viewed as a useful foreign policy ally/tool, and hence a national security asset.

Low Threat

- *political mobilization and recruitment within the diaspora ethnic community by militant organizations.*
- *voluntary fund-raising* for militant causes among diaspora communities.
- *surveillance of legitimate diaspora political activity by host countries,* involving operations by foreign (homeland) intelligence agencies in host countries.
- *criminal activity in third countries,* organized or supported by diaspora militant groups in the host country.

Medium Threat

- *diaspora-centered command , control, communications, intelligence* (known, in military terms, as “C3I”) *and logistics activities by militant groups.* This would include the management and training of militant cells, the secure transmission of instructions, the provision of safe houses, the provision of falsified documents, the provision of weapons and other material, and the collection of information on potential targets for paramilitary activity.

- *criminal fund-raising by militant organizations*, whether directed at the ethnic community itself (extortion) or at the host society as a whole (theft, credit-card fraud, drug-smuggling). Closely related to this is money-laundering and financial transfers used to support the activities of militants. Frequently, relations of convenience may be established between political militants and criminal groups.
- *physical/criminal intimidation of members of diaspora communities by militants*, so as to coerce family members or others in the homeland.
- *intimidation of members of the diaspora communities by foreign (homeland) intelligence agencies*. This may involve efforts to recruit informers, obtain information, or intimidate homeland activists through threats to their family members abroad.
- *political and economic pressure on the host country by the homeland state, related to diaspora political activity*. This might take the form of economic sanctions or other actions affecting the interests of host countries. It might also take the form of new security and border-crossing procedures, visa requirements, or other procedures applied to the host country. In Canada, for example, the threat posed by al-Qa'ida terrorism has been accompanied a serious threat to Canadian national interests by potential US security-related border controls.⁵
- *terrorism and criminal violence in third countries, organized or supported by diaspora militant groups in the host country*. Whether such violence is seen as a threat by host country national security decision-makers depends on both its scope and target. Efforts by al-Qa'ida operatives to organize major attacks against the US would be seen by most European governments as representing a high degree of security threat, while efforts by pro-Western Iraqi refugees to

⁵ More than \$1.9 billion in goods and more than 300,000 people cross the Canada-US border each day—by far the largest bilateral trading relationship in the world, equal to 56% of Canada's Gross Domestic Product. As a result, the introduction of more time-consuming or expensive border-crossing procedures has substantial economic implications for Canada. For the high-level foreign policy attention given to this issue in the wake of September 11, see <http://www.can-am.gc.ca/menu-e.asp?mid=1&cat=10>.

subvert the regime of Saddam Hussein would not (and might even be assisted).

High Threat

- *violence against host country institutions or population by diaspora-based militant groups.* This may include violence against other ethnic or diaspora groups within the host country by diaspora-based militant groups.
- *violence against international targets* (for example, embassies, multinational companies, international organizations, or expatriates) in the host country by diaspora-based militant groups.
- *any activities by diaspora-based militant groups involving weapons of mass destruction.*
- *violence against diaspora groups by foreign (homeland) intelligence agencies,* such as assassinations against diaspora political leaders, or arson or bombings attacks against political offices or community centers.
- *military retaliation by the homeland country against the host country* as a consequence of the activities of diaspora political or military activities, or retaliatory support by the homeland government of armed groups operating in the host state. Perhaps the most destabilizing example of this dynamic was Austrian military action against Serbia in response to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Bosnia in June 1914 by Bosnian Serb exiles—a sequence of events that triggered World War One. South African destabilization of Mozambique and Angola in the 1970s and 1980s in response to their support for the anti-apartheid struggle is another noteworthy case, resulting in direct or indirect civilian casualties numbering in the millions. Israeli punitive and retaliatory attacks against Lebanon and against the diaspora-based Palestinian nationalist movement there in the 1960s and 1970s culminated in full-scale war in 1982.⁶ Most recently, the Taliban's

⁶ On efforts by the PLO to maintain a secure diaspora base for its political and paramilitary activities, see Rex Brynen, *Sanctuary and Survival: The PLO in Lebanon* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

provision of support and sanctuary to Usama bin Ladin and his al-Qa'ida network sparked the current US military intervention in Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Factors Shaping the Security Challenge

A number of factors shape the magnitude of the security challenge that the presence of diaspora groups might pose to host countries. These are hypothesized below.

The first and most important of these relates to the *intensity of homeland conflict*, and especially the degree of *militarized conflict*. Where such conflict is high—whether in the form of ethnic discrimination, domestic repression, civil war, of military occupation—it is much more likely that diaspora-based militant groups will emerge, or that homeland militants will forge links to diaspora populations.

A second set of variables relates to the *demographic characteristics* of the diaspora population. These include:

- *the total size of the diaspora*, and hence the potential strength and complexity of diaspora-based political organization.
- *the size of the diaspora group in the host country*, with larger diaspora communities again more likely to sustain greater and more complex political organization.
- *the geographic concentration of the diaspora population within the host country*. In general, political groups are more easily able to mobilize support in geographically-concentrated diaspora populations than those that are spread out. However, the advent of the internet and other new information and communication technologies has dramatically increased the ability of diaspora populations to network despite geographic distance.⁷
- *the socio-economic status of the diaspora group*. Wealthier and better-educated diasporas are better able to contribute financial and organizational resources to diaspora political groups than are poorer communities. On the

⁷ See, for example, David Romano, “Modern Communications Technology in Ethnic Nationalist Hands: The Case of the Kurds,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 35, 1 (March 2002).

other hand, poorer diaspora populations may be more likely to join militant groups and engage in violent activities.

A third set of variables relate to the political (although not necessarily physical) *proximity and linkages of the host country to the homeland*. In this respect, security challenges are likely to be shaped by:

- *geographic proximity to the diaspora homeland*, with adjacent host countries most vulnerable to spill-over conflict, entangling political connections, refugee movements, intelligence operations, retaliation, and similar linkages with potential security implications. With regard to the potential threat of intelligence activity or retaliation, *the power of the homeland state* is of importance too, with more powerful homeland countries posing more potential security challenges to hosts than do weaker ones.
- *ethnic linkages to the diaspora homeland*, with the national security implications of diaspora political activity heightened when other, large ethnic communities in the host country have ethno-linguistic, religious, or other ties to large ethnic groups in the homeland country.
- *political linkages between the host country to the homeland country*, where the national security implications of diaspora political activity are likely to be greatest where the host country is a great power (or former colonial power or mediator) with extensive foreign policy linkages to the homeland.

A fourth set of variables relate to the *political relationship between the host state and the diaspora group*:

- The potential security implications of diaspora political activity is especially heightened if the *foreign policy of the host country is viewed as inimical to the interests of the diaspora population*, whether by the population as a whole or by militant groups within it. Examples of this might include host country political, financial, or military support for a repressive homeland government or to an opposing side in a civil conflict. Conversely, the security challenge is sharply reduced if the foreign policy of the host country is seen as supportive of the interests of the diaspora population.

- The potential security implications of diaspora political activity may also be heightened if the *domestic policy of the host country is viewed as inimical to the interests of the diaspora population*. Examples of this would include officially-sanctioned or tolerated discrimination against the diaspora population; refugee and immigration policies which appear to disadvantage members of the diaspora population; mobility restrictions or surveillance measures; or the arrest, detention, or extradition by the host country of diaspora militants.
- The *degree of integration of the diaspora group within the host society* has important implication for potential security challenges. More integrated groups are likely to be less likely to support militant organization which target host institutions, while less integrated and more alienated groups are more likely to do so. Such integration, in turn, is shaped by a number of additional factors. These include *the age of the diaspora presence* (with long-established, multi-generational groups likely to be better integrated), the *domestic policies of the host country* (as discussed above), and *the degree of cultural affinity or differentiation* between the diaspora population and the host society.
- Finally, *political leadership within the diaspora group* can be of importance in how the community interacts with both the state and with militant groups within its ranks. Security challenges are sharply reduced when community leaders have strong community support, good links with elected officials and law enforcement, and speak out strongly against extremist activities. Conversely, where diaspora leaders are weak (or leadership is divided), relations with host authorities are poor, and militant activities tolerated or supported by community leaders, the security challenges for the host country are exacerbated.

Addressing the Security Challenges of Diaspora Groups

This paper has summarized the sorts of security implications associated with the presence of diaspora groups, and has identified those factors which may tend to increase or decrease the level of security concern. By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest some elements that are likely to enhance the ability of host countries to deal with the security challenges associated with diaspora populations.

Conceptually, these elements revolve around the notion that diaspora communities ought to be seen not as (or not only as) a potential national security challenge, but also as a key asset essential to effective counter-terrorism, counter-intelligence, criminal intelligence, and similar efforts. In particular, it should be stressed that:

- Effective integration of diaspora communities into the social mainstream—or perhaps, more accurately, a sense of belonging and participation which strengthens citizenship without the price of assimilation—dramatically reduces many of the security risks identified above. Even militant supporters of violent homeland struggles may be able to distinguish between violence directed at a homeland foe (which they may support), and violence directed at the institutions and population of a host country (to which they feel a sense of belonging, and against which they would oppose any violent action).
- Many of the chief tools of effective counterterrorism and counterintelligence are remarkably similar to those of good community policing. Diaspora populations themselves are particularly well equipped to detect in their midst activities that are detrimental to host country security—but this information is useless if it remains locked inside a tight-lipped community. Consequently, security agencies need to develop relations of trust and transparency with diaspora communities. Consultation is important with community leaders. Recruitment into security and law enforcement agencies needs to reflect the ethnic diversity of the population, and agencies need to purposefully develop the linguistic and cultural skills to necessary for a nuanced understanding of community politics. Moreover, personnel from non-majority backgrounds need to be empowered to speak out against the preconceptions,

misperceptions, and biases they find within their own law enforcement organizations.⁸

It follows from these observations that exclusionary or discriminatory security measures targeted against particular transnational ethnic communities are at grave risk of failure, or even backfiring. Such measures threaten to alienate diaspora populations, aggravate the barriers between communities and local law enforcement officials, and heighten the sense of alienation upon which extremist groups may prey.

⁸ This is a substantial problem. One Canadian law enforcement official from a diaspora community recently expressed to me his frustration at being forced to conform to what he felt was an inaccurate understanding of his community. To challenge these biases, however, was risk his career prospects within his organization.

About the Author

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All views expressed in this paper are his own, and in no way represent those of the Government of Canada or any other agency.

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