Cross-Border Terror Networks: A Social Network Analysis across the Canada-US border

Christian Leuprecht
Royal Military College of Canada and Queen’s University
Overview

• Mythmaking & reality at the Canada-US border
• The paradox of securing open borders
• Paradigm shift: Networks, not terrorists
• Dark networks with lots of light
• Modelling cross-border interaction by politically motivated violent extremists
• Policy implications/questions/debates
• What we know that we don’t know, and why it matters that we don’t know...
• US Senators Ask Military to Patrol Canadian Border — Toronto Star, February 10, 2011

• Integrated border proposal looms as key election issue — Globe and Mail, February 6, 2011

• Northern Border not Secure Enough — Fox News, February 5, 2011
• CANADA PREPARING TO 'HARDEN' BORDER WITH UNITED STATES — Buffalo News, December 4, 2002.

• Once Porous Northern Border becomes a Challenge to Secure — Dallas News, October 21, 2001

• Attorney general seeks to strengthen border security with National Guard, military helicopters — Associated Press, December 2, 2001
Networks...

- Create countervailing transaction costs?
- Create markets of opportunity?
- Increase marginal costs?
Apply Social Network Analysis to

(1) identify the drivers, nature and direction of Canada-US extremist cross-border traffic;

(2) generate hypotheses from a limited dataset that can be subjected to further empirical scrutiny with the aim of modeling cross-border extremist networks more generally

(3) assess the risk they pose by measuring the extent to which such networks increase or reduce marginal costs
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Drivers

- Attacks on the US from Canada by Canadians (Ressam – jihadi, 2000)
- Attacks on the US by a Canadian recruited from the US (Thurston – animal rights, 2005)
- Drawing on support from the US to increase capabilities of Canadians to carry out violent extremism in Canada and potentially facilitate domestic attacks (Toronto 18 – jihadi, 2005)
Metcalf’s Law

whereas the cost of a network grows linearly with the number of connections, the value of a network is proportional to the square of the number of members of a network

Strength of Weak Ties:

the greater the number of inter-connected users, the greater is the threat: a proliferation in the frequency of and capability to maintain bridging ties
two cross-border networks are between large groups on one side of the border and one or a few on the other (The Family – Thurston and Rubin, Toronto 18 – Sadequee and Ahmed);

five are between small groups on both sides of the border (Ressam, Warsame, Thanigasalam, Daher, Rana);

four are for the purpose of enabling attacks in other countries (Thanigasalam, Warsame, Daher, Rana);

four derive from connections stemming from a country other than Canada (Ressam, Thurston, Thanigasalam, Rana) as countries of origin or places of terrorist training or propaganda.
Modelling politically motivate cross-border violent extremism

• H1: The existence of similar policies with regards to individual rights and freedoms enables the development of cross-border networks: Similar laws concerning freedom of association, speech, and so forth make it easier for individuals and groups with like-minded goals and values to establish connections;

• H2: Differences in policy create markets of opportunity on either side of the border;

• H3: Those bent on extremist violence exploit the countervailing transaction costs thus created for material and ideational gain;

• H4: Social, ethnic and diaspora capital acts as an enabler in the exploitation of countervailing transaction costs;

• H5: Borders impose costs that limit the development of large, well-connected networks: large networks on one or other side of a border tend to interact with small units on the other side;

• H6: The actors involved behave strategically, and cross-border networks are a means to an end.
Observations/Questions

• No systematic threat emanates from Canada
• It’s a two-way street
• Canada lives next to the world’s largest weapon’s market: What’s the solution? Policy harmonization? Higher inspection rates?
• Terrorists cross legally at points of entry; we wouldn’t detect them, certainly not because of more technology
• Why enforce between ports of entry when terrorists don’t cross there?
• Is terrorism really the problem? Would all this money not be better spent on intel and investigations? Why not get rid of land-border inspections altogether?
• Who are we trying to protect?
Ongoing & Future Research

• Terrorist are thought to leverage org crime networks; but rational choice suggests their networks are different

• Networks are functional: differentiation determines the structure and composition of the network

• The counter-intuitive effects of more security at the border