Trudeau exploits Edmonton attack to lay groundwork for anti-refugee measures

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Canada's Liberal government is turning to stoking anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim prejudice in the aftermath of the September 30 attack on a police officer and passers-by in Edmonton, Alberta.

Within hours of the incident, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared it a terrorist attack, although everything indicated that no more than the actions of a lone, troubled individual were involved. Now Trudeau is claiming that the Edmonton attack points to the need for his government to overhaul the entire refugee system so as to make it more restrictive.

Last week Alberta Police confirmed that the man charged with stabbing a police officer and hitting four pedestrians with a truck is Abdulahi Hasan Sharif, a 30-year-old Somalian refugee.

Sharif currently faces five counts of attempted murder, four counts of criminal flight causing bodily harm, and one count each of dangerous driving and possession of a weapon for a dangerous purpose. At this point, no terrorism-related charges have been filed against Sharif and there are media reports suggesting that officials are doubtful they could secure a conviction on such charges despite the Criminal Code's expansive definition of terrorism.

The accused has agreed to a six-week adjournment in the legal proceedings against him and is next scheduled to appear in court on November 14. He is now in custody in the mental health unit at the Edmonton Remand Centre, where he was reportedly placed on a suicide watch.

The federal and provincial governments have continued to stick to their portrayal of the attack as a terrorist attack, even though investigators agree that Sharif acted alone, have provided no evidence showing he had any ties to a terrorist organization, and have said nothing about Sharif's possible motive.

In the mold of his predecessor Stephen Harper who seized on twin "lone wolf" attacks in October, 2014 as the pretext for legislation dramatically expanding the powers of the national-security apparatus (Bill C-51), Trudeau is preparing to use the Edmonton incident to clamp down on the rights of refugees and asylum seekers.

In recent months, the Trudeau government has been aggressively seeking to dissuade Haitian asylum seekers and others targeted by US President Donald Trump's anti-immigrant witch hunt from seeking refuge in Canada.

Making reference to the entry of Sharif from the US into Canada in five years ago, Trudeau said, "We're looking into the whole [refugee] system and will reflect on whether we need to do things differently certainly in the future than the way they were done in 2012."

To be sure, the Edmonton attack, whatever its motivation, was deeply reactionary. But the Liberal government's attempt to us it to whip up an anti-refugee atmosphere and climate of fear with references to a purported growing "terrorist" threat is aimed at legitimizing its own right-wing agenda of a militarist foreign policy in close alliance with the United States, and a clampdown on democratic rights at home.

Just hours after the September 30th attack, Edmonton police announced the incident was to be investigated as an "act of terrorism," saying they had found an ISIS flag in Sharif's car. The media and politicians of all stripes, including Trudeau and Alberta's New Democrat Premier Rachel Notley, then rushed to declare the incident a "terrorist" act.

Sharif is accused of ramming his Malibu into police officer Mike Chernyk, before stabbing him with a knife. According to the official narrative, Chernyk was able to repel the attack and the assailant then fled on foot. Almost four hours later, police at a traffic checkpoint stopped Sharif, who was driving a U-Haul truck, as they believed him to be the cop's assailant. When the police started to challenge him, Sharif allegedly drove away at high speed, triggering a major police chase through downtown Edmonton at high-speed.

The accused struck four pedestrians during the chase, which ended when a police manoeuver caused the U-Haul to overturn. Tactical-team police then deployed a stun grenade and a taser to arrest him. The victims suffered light to severe injuries.

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The police have alleged that Sharif hit the four pedestrians intentionally, but much about what happened on the night of Sept. 30 remains unclear.

After the attack the RCMP revealed that Sharif was interviewed by the intelligence services' Integrated National Security Enforcement Team in 2015, after they had received a complaint about his extremist views. INSET concluded he did not represent a threat. Public Security Minister Ralph Goodale has also confirmed Sharif was on a terrorism watch-list.

As the *WSWS* noted, Sharif's presence on a watch-list raises serious questions about the authorities' response. If his identity was known, why did police declare there to be no threat to public safety in a press conference almost two hours after the attack on the police officer? And since authorities considered him to be a terrorist threat, why did police chase him through streets packed with people, giving him added opportunity and motive to strike passers-by with his vehicle?

The Trudeau government's exploitation of the attack to justify a clampdown on refugees must be understood as a sign of its rapid shift to the right. In 2014, when in opposition, Trudeau responded to a more serious incident, when lone gunman Michael Zehaf-Bibeau shot dead a soldier at the War Memorial in Ottawa and then engaged in a gun battle on Parliament Hill, by refusing to describe it as a terrorist attack. Zehaf-Bibeau, a troubled young man with mental health problems, had no connection to a terrorist organization.

In the two years since securing victory in the 2015 election, the Liberals have junked their "progressive" campaign rhetoric. The Trudeau government has adopted a new defence policy that includes a 70 percent hike in military spending, launched a drive to privatize public infrastructure, and maintained the core elements of Harper's draconian Bill C-51 in their own Bill C-59.

Trudeau's embrace of anti-refugee rhetoric is particularly significant, given that he made much of his refugee-friendly credentials in the fall 2015 election campaign and continued to do after becoming Prime Minister. In truth, this has always been a fraud, aimed at lending his reactionary policies a "humane" gloss.

The most right-wing elements within the media and political establishment have seized on the Edmonton attack to stoke hostility to immigrants and call for increased police powers. *Toronto Sun* columnist Farzana Hassan wrote that attack allegedly carried out by Sharif "could have been prevented had the police had greater powers of monitoring and restricting the activities of someone who was known to them as a potential genocidal maniac." Hassan then urged the Trudeau government to "review its open border policy, as it may potentially make Canada more unsafe."

Former Harper cabinet member Jason Kenney, who is seeking the leadership of Alberta's new United Conservative Party, called Sharif a "terrorist criminal" and expressed his hope that Sharif will be "kicked out of the country." Kenney, like his former colleagues in the Conservative Party, is appealing to the Liberals to amend the "safe third country" agreement with the United States. This deal currently allows refugees to claim asylum in Canada if they cross the border outside of a regular checkpoint, a loophole Kenney and others want eliminated.

More details on Abdulahi Hasan's personal circumstance and his journey to Canada have emerged in recent days. What is publicly known at this point is that the young man crossed the border from Mexico into the United States in July 2011 and was almost immediately turned over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as he had no papers. In September 2011, an immigration judge ordered Sharif to be removed to Somalia even though he had no criminal history. Sharif appealed the decision, was released and ordered to report to ICE in 2012, but did not do so. Instead, he crossed into Canada at a regular point of entry and received refugee status.

Edmonton human rights activist Mahamad Accord had a brief interview with Sharif after he was taken into custody following last month's attack. Accord told CBC that the accused claims he rarely attends a mosque and that religion does not play a major role in his life. "We couldn't find the intent of terrorism," Accord said, but Sharif has "been tried and convicted in the media." He also noted that Sharif is likely suffering from trauma, given that he is a refugee from a war-torn country, one that for years has been the target of US military operations. "Physically they're fine but the damage is still there mentally," said Accord, adding, "What we observed from him is that he has no grasp of reality."

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