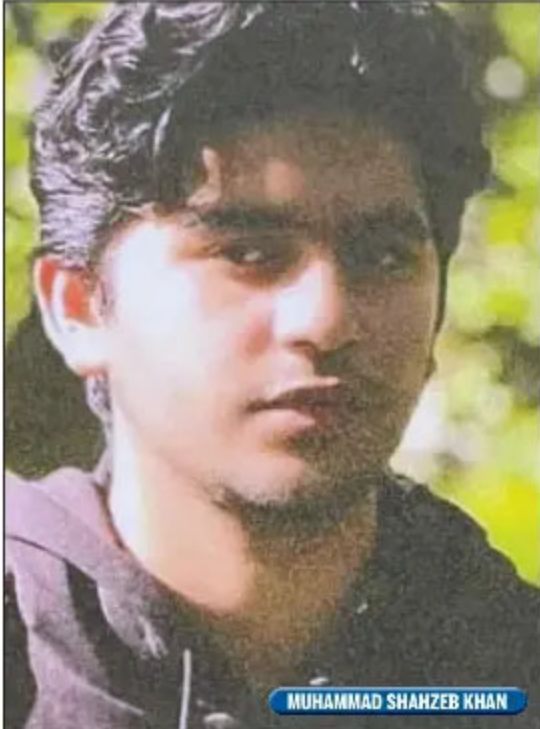


'Critical weaknesses'

Canada's student visa vetting blamed as terrorist pleads guilty

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OTTAWA — Just weeks after Canada's auditor general highlighted “critical weaknesses” in how Canada vets student visa applicants, a Toronto immigration lawyer warns that this week's conviction of an Islamic State-inspired would-be terrorist demonstrates how bad the problem has become.



On Wednesday, 21-year-old Muhammad Shahzeb Khan, also known as “Shahzeb Jadoon,” pleaded guilty to his attempt to carry out a mass shooting against a Jewish centre in Brooklyn, N.Y. — a plan that led to him being arrested attempting to sneak across the Canada-u.s. border to carry out his attack.

“Khan planned a mass shooting at a Jewish centre in New York City, timed to coincide with the anniversary of the Oct. 7 (2023) Hamas attacks, with the explicit goal of killing as many Jews as possible,” Assistant Attorney General John A. Eisenberg said in a U.S. Department of Justice press release. “Khan declared that New York City was the ‘perfect’ venue for his attack because of its large Jewish population and boasted that his plot could be the largest attack on U.S. soil since 9/11.”

Possessing a student visa, Khan, a Pakistani national, landed at Toronto Pearson International Airport in June 2023.

Until his September 2024 arrest, Khan lived in Mississauga.

His terror plans caught the attention of the FBI mere months after his arrival, triggering an investigation that saw the would-be jihadi interact with undercover agents in his attempt to

acquire rifles and knives, and make arrangements to be smuggled across the border.

Canadian authorities arrested Khan in September 2024 in Ormstown, Que., a little under 20 km from the border.

Reports by CBC News suggest Khan told an immigration consultant that he was gay and was in the process of claiming refugee status on the basis of his homosexuality. He's to be sentenced in August. Prominent Toronto-based Immigration Lawyer Sergio Karas told the Toronto Sun the Khan case highlights critical flaws in how Canada vets incoming immigrants, particularly those coming here under student visas.

"The auditor general noted in her report two weeks ago that even when the department was aware of fraud and people with problems, they weren't following up on leads, and the vast majority still received other types of immigration benefits even after their applications were filed," he said. "There's probably much more that is wrong with the system concerning vetting of potential study permit applicants — and refugees and immigrants in general — than meets the eye, and, in this case, it was law enforcement that caught this particular person when he was about to commit and act of terrorism."

Indeed, the March 23 report from Auditor General Karen Hogan found what she described as "critical weaknesses" in how international students are vetted.

"While the department introduced a new tool that verified 97% of acceptance letters issued by learning institutions included in study permit applications, it did not effectively investigate students already in Canada who were flagged as potentially not complying with the terms of their study permits," the report read. "In 2023 and 2024, a total of about 150,000 cases were flagged, but the department had enough funding to investigate only about 4,000."

The report also noted the Immigration Department didn't follow up on 800 specific applicants who officials determined entered Canada using fraudulent documents or other deception, but they weren't dealt with.

"Most of these individuals later applied for other immigration permits while in Canada, and more than half of those applications have been approved," the report read.

Given the current state of world affairs — particularly ongoing strife in terrorist-supporting regimes like Iran — Karas said Canada's lackadaisical approach to vetting newcomers is a huge red flag.

"This calls for a legislative solution that would give the minister of Immigration, and in consultation with the minister of Public Safety, the power to revoke visas and status without going to hearings, based on national security," Karas said.