OP-ED: Canada can stay open—but must get serious about security screening

Lawyer Sergio R. Karas writes, "The law places the burden on applicants to declare criminal history. In practice, foreign records can be incomplete or unreliable."

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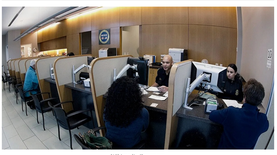

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By: Sergio R. Karas

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Canadians don't need to choose between an open immigration system and a safe one. But the status quo—fragmented screening, inconsistent referral triggers, and slow enforcement—invites avoidable risk and corrodes confidence in decisions. The July 2024 arrest of Ahmed Eldidi, shortly after he was granted citizenship, is a stark reminder that when critical information surfaces late, the system's most consequential decisions may already be irreversible. The answer isn't to slam the door; it's to modernize how Canada screens, shares information, and acts quickly in the most serious cases.

Eldidi's case shows the danger of treating security screening as a one-and-done checkpoint. He is accused of planning an ISIS-inspired attack in Toronto and of appearing in a 2015 ISIS propaganda video. Officials told Parliament they were unaware of that video during screening, and that he wasn't referred for comprehensive CSIS/CBSA screening when he made a refugee claim in 2018 because preliminary checks found "no concerns". By the time additional intelligence emerged in 2024, he had already become a citizen. An internal review later described "process gaps".

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Then there's the case of Gullfam Hussain, a Pakistani national convicted in Britain for sexually abusing his underage niece. Reporting says he omitted that conviction when applying for a Canadian visitor visa and still received approval—an example of how a system that leans heavily on self-disclosure and uneven access to foreign records can miss serious criminality. Once in Canada, the same reporting says removal became tangled in prolonged proceedings, stretching the time between discovery and outcome.

And suspected war criminals can linger in a similar limbo. Bill Horace, a former Liberian rebel commander accused of atrocities, fled to Canada in 2002 and lived in Ontario for years while allegations about his role in Liberia's civil war were reported publicly. He was denied refugee status but remained by launching legal challenges. Authorities did not criminally charge him under the *Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act*, citing evidentiary and resource constraints. Since 2016, 111 people have been denied refugee protection due to suspected war crimes or genocide, yet only four had citizenship revoked and 84 received deportation orders in that period—a gap between identifying a problem and resolving it.

These cases aren't identical, but the pattern is. Canada's system relies on multiple agencies with different mandates and data, it depends too much on what applicants disclose (and what foreign records can prove), and it moves slowly once a file becomes contested. Those three realities show up again and again in reviews, court backlogs, and parliamentary testimony.

IRCC, CBSA, CSIS and the RCMP each hold pieces of the puzzle, but no single authority is fully accountable for the end-to-end outcome. When responsibility is dispersed, red flags can be missed, delayed or never escalated in time.

The law places the burden on applicants to declare criminal history, backed by police certificates and fingerprints. In practice, foreign records can be incomplete or unreliable, and non-disclosure can slip through depending on what information is available to officers. And once a file is cleared early, it may not be systematically re-screened when new information emerges later.

When cases go to hearings and court, timelines can stretch for years. Federal Court immigration filings have quadrupled since 2019, reaching more than 24,000 in 2024 and projected to exceed 30,000 in 2025, and the chief justice has warned about the strain on confidence in the system.

Fixing this doesn't require abandoning fairness or generosity. It requires bringing clarity and speed to the small slice of cases where credible security, serious criminality, or war-crimes concerns exist—and where delay can make later action far harder. Here are four practical steps Ottawa can take:

Put one office in charge of the hardest files. Parliament should mandate a screening coordination centre so IRCC, CBSA, CSIS and the RCMP stop operating on parallel tracks. The point isn't a bureaucratic merger; it's accountability. Every flagged file should have a named case owner, clear referral triggers for deeper screening, and published service standards so "process gaps" don't become permanent excuses. Privacy protections and audit logs can—and should—be built in from day one.

Update the law for modern threats—and pair it with fair speed. Sections 34–37 of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* were drafted before today's reality of cyber-enabled extremism and foreign interference. Parliament should modernize the grounds for inadmissibility and pair any expansion with clear evidentiary thresholds and reasons requirements. For the most serious files, Ottawa should also build an expedited track—defined gates, dedicated capacity, and published time targets—so cases don't languish indefinitely while still protecting disclosure and independent review. Where the legal test is met, IRCC should move citizenship revocation cases forward on a transparent timeline rather than letting them drift.

Treat screening as a process, not a moment. If immigration pathways take years, screening can't be a one-time snapshot. Canada should re-check high-risk files at key milestones—work permits, permanent residence, citizenship—and create a clear queue for triaging new intelligence when it appears. Better data feeds and open-source monitoring can help flag new derogatory information, but safeguards matter: published triggers, retention limits, and human review before adverse decisions.

Make data-sharing and case management work in real time. Screening is only as strong as the systems behind it. Canada should move toward a shared case record—role-based access, audit trails—so a red flag discovered by one agency doesn't sit in a silo. Ottawa should also set clearer expectations for partner data-sharing initiatives like the "Migration 5" biometric consortium, including turnaround targets and escalation paths when matches are found. And because tools don't run themselves, this has to come with training and measurable performance reporting.

Canada's openness depends on public trust, and trust depends on competence: clear accountability, credible screening, and timely outcomes in the cases that pose the greatest risk. The Eldidi case shows what happens when key information arrives late. The backlogs now overwhelming immigration litigation show what happens when the system can't bring files to closure. Ottawa doesn't need grand slogans. It needs to put someone in charge of the hardest cases, modernize the legal framework, re-check files as new information emerges, and ensure agencies can share and act on intelligence in real time—while keeping privacy and due-process safeguards intact. That's how Canada stays both open and secure.

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William Stewart 10h

When it comes to security and screening I don't think one can say either of those two as long as Liberals are in power.

A sad but reasonable statement given events all around in what used to be Canada.

Oddly...

Little of this was a problem prior to 2015.

Coincidence...????

Not a chance.

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RON CASKEY 7h

Is it any wonder we have an immigration problem where criminals are allowed in because of incompetence of 11 years of Liberal mismanagement.

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