

THE PATH TO SELF-RADICALIZATION: READINGS INTO THE CASE OF MARTIN 'AHMAD' COUTURE-ROULEAU (AHMAD LE CONVERTI)

By:
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Abstract

In the morning of October 20th 2014, Martin 'Ahmad' Rouleau or Ahmad Le Converti, a Canadian Muslim convert from Quebec, Canada, slammed a car into two Canadian Armed Forces members in the parking lot of a Service Canada in Saint-Jean-Sur-Richelieu. The attack caused the tragic death of Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent, a long-serving member of the Armed Forces. Rouleau was later pursued and killed. This incident not only manifests without doubt the disturbing and active manipulation of religious ideology, but also poses the beginning of complex and interrelated problems that cannot be singlehandedly dismissed; significant given the unique danger it poses to both national and international security. Rouleau's case presents us with an intense interplay between religious conversion, Canadian citizenship, religious interpretation, online religious learning, self-radicalization and the resultant shaping of a destructive malign 'lone-wolf' terrorist and the ensuing security threat it imposes. This paper would trace the journey of self-guided radicalization undergone by Rouleau, tracking the emotional, personal, psychological and religious influences that culminated in the unexpected violence that shook a nation that so strongly identifies with the preservation of human dignity and life.

Keywords: Muslim Convert, Martin 'Ahmad' Rouleau. ISIS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Self-Radicalization. Canadian Muslims.

Introduction

Martin Couture-Rouleau, or Martin 'Ahmad' Couture-Rouleau (Ahmad Le Converti) had converted to Islam in 2013. According to friends and family, following his conversion Mr. Couture-Rouleau began to embrace increasingly extremist views; succumbing to the sway of *jihadi* ideology on the Internet, and using the handle Ahmed Rouleau on his Facebook page.¹ While his case is most certainly interesting and relevant due to the nature of security threats and increasingly globalized terrorism the world witnesses today, it is all the more pressing due to the uniqueness of an increasingly disturbing and threatening phenomenon: self-radicalization. Rouleau presents a unique case and disturbing precedent, given that the radical transformation he endured went so far as to not only distort his emotional and personal inner balance to the extent that it did, but to also subvert a sense of national identity and Canadianship he had held to his entire life.

In this, the Rouleau case reinforces the reality that the processes of radicalization and self-radicalization by extension are not limited to any specific background, but rather preys on aspects universal to all². Rouleau was not a member of a terrorist cell in any conventional sense. His actions were not coordinated, sophisticated or tactically construed, but rather independently undertaken in response to a broad call for bloodshed that was only effective due to the self-wrought changes he took upon himself, making himself receptive to the call for violence. As strange as the phenomenon appears, self-radicalization while atypical in its incubation, can nonetheless be engaged with in similar frameworks used in both radicalization and counter-radicalization studies³.

The changes Rouleau underwent were neither gradual nor linear. Each process of radicalization is often unique, in much the same way a virus takes advantage of the weakest link in an immune system. Though odd in

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¹ Peritz, Ingrid. (2016). *Father of Couture-Rouleau says government must strengthen security laws*. 2014. www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/father-of-couture-rouleau-says-government-must-strengthen-security-laws/article21308978/. Accessed 20 Dec. 2014.

² Moghaddam, F. M. (2005). The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration. *American Psychologist*. American Psychological Association, (60), 161-169.

³ Taylor, M., & Horgan, J. (2006). A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18: 4, 2.

development, it was arguably catalyzed through limited interpersonal interaction, further unconditional submersion and even loss of self in numbing shadowy recesses of extremist and radical internet enclaves offering graphic content to the unwary. In these enclaves, Rouleau made a choice to find comfort with stimulating submersion into never-ending, ensnaring graphic scenes and a rhetoric of inhumanness, hate, violence, and apathy that specifically preys on the impressionable, lonely, uninformed or even mildly aggrieved. In spite of the content and vitriolic hate espoused in these dark radical pools, they somehow gained legitimacy, followed by traction in Rouleau's mind. How this occurred had as much to do with his mental state of being as the methods used to gain his trust. In the words of Harvard psychologist John Mack, radical ideologues provide a cyclical pool of rhetoric espousing 'misery, hurt, helplessness and rage' through which radical agents are primed for recruitment⁴.

Mental desensitization and adaptation invariably occurred at his own personal pace, given a medium that caters to its viewers with the impression of control, yet is nonetheless structured to desensitize them further and further into what had once been alarming, extreme modes of thought. This erosion and rewriting of the self caused him to fall prey to ever novel yet stranger self-breeding mindsets to say the least. Online Jihadi content often relies on this very self-furthering factor by utilizing clever pained rhetorical flourishes and tautologies that seek to not only disturb, but cause the subject to reconsider what they once took for solid ideals; chiefly patriotism, loyalty and duty to a higher cause replaced by vague faith-based infinities of eternal reward and assured blessings and grace of the Divine. To reach this stage, grievances are first presented and discussed seeking to win sympathy; a sort of gateway commitment to the slippery slope of emotional support. The most popular snares presented are built on ethnic, racial, legal, political, religious, social and economic platforms⁵.

Throughout the course of this fed, growing internal monologue, as evident from his friend and family's testimony, the former loved ones, now newly-dubbed 'strangers' were slowly yet surely pushed away and strictly denied entry with exception to his new virtual friends and guests who offered understanding without judgement, confident answers and spoke as all recruiters and Jihadi propagandists do; with the carefree bravado of the confident and fearless assured in their cause's legitimacy and moral superiority. To someone lacking self-esteem in their role or person, or someone slowly losing touch with what was once a firm grounded reality, the offer of unconditional brotherhood was likely seductive. The compassion and warm accepting brotherhood offered in exchange for agreement and participation, no matter how small, within a greater group identity becomes progressively easier and easier to proffer, renouncement of the enemy whether silent or spoken ever easier and easier to profess.

To understand this lure of brotherhood offered, we take a look at Jerrold Post's founded assertion that the individual need to belong is often exacerbated among cross-sections of populations feeling isolated or victimized. For lack of other constructive paths, adopting a radical group identity self-perceivably empowers and rectifies this. Group identity offers attractive emotional and cognitive stability, dependent on shared ideals and beliefs.⁶ Post suggests that acquired terrorist group identity generates a drive to carry out certain acts, based on some sense of duty, responsibility or perhaps answering a higher calling, which in turn necessitates the birth of a balancing distorted rationalization to match said impulse⁷. In this manner Rouleau's self-radicalization gained traction. Ironically enough, it is possible that even he did not realize what was occurring. For him, this was research, tolerance of the 'Other', discovery, and perhaps even slightly subversive.

Accordingly, under the guise of his 'objective' self-control no other scene was allowed to play other than the scenes he felt comfortable viewing. That this process eventually culminated in the terror attack he carried out reflects the extent to which manipulative content on the internet affects behavioural change and adaptation

⁴ Mack, J. E. (2003). Deeper Causes: Exploring the Role of Consciousness in Terrorism. *Ions Noetic Sciences Review*, USA, p. 13.

⁵ Ross, Ian Jeffry. (1993). Structural Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism. *Journal of Peace Research*, Sage, Publications Ltd, 3: 325.

⁶ Post, M. Jerrold. (2005). When hatred is bred in the bone: The Socio-Cultural Underpinnings of Terrorist Psychology. *Political Psychology*, 615-636.

⁷ Post, J. M. (1998). Terrorist Psycho-Logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces. In W. Reich (Ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, State of Mind*. Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, pp. 25-40.

through innocuous desensitization and predatory socialization, capitalizing on cases of emotional isolation⁸. Described by his congregation, none of these changes were outwardly apparent aside from his reticence: “Mr Martin came to do his prayers sometimes without having much contact with the other worshippers; he was a reserved person who appeared sympathetic and who stayed relatively discreet.”⁹

The question that begs to be asked, is whether Rouleau could have simply trusted a local Muslim guide instead of a virtual mentor. Instead of the available local religious guide, he chose one that was accessible, ‘private’, optional, ‘knowledgeable’, timely, friendly and free. The rationale behind his choice is in need of study. The radical mentor he subscribed to slowly stripped away his community’s imparted genuine interests and guidance, and instead prodded him towards newer emotional and pseudo-intellectual zones that were presumably real, comfortable and religiously sound, in which Rouleau would reflect deeply on his own ideas with a sense of intellectual freedom, yet nonetheless strictly through the lenses of a virtual mentor possessed of ulterior motives, and eventually altogether alienated from any official religious dictum.

In this context, indoctrination is made easier through the use of online mediums. The target of cyber-radicalization is more vulnerable to indoctrination and influence through an ‘online disinhibition effect’, that while not entirely responsible for Rouleau’s change definitely played a role in his transformation. Due to the nature of the medium itself, social restrictions and inhibitions are reduced due to dissociative anonymity, which make it easier to open up to strangers in search of catharsis in a manner that would have been unthinkable in face-to-face conversations¹⁰. Conventional morality and values in such a context, may also witness partial suspension, given that online discussion and exploration are often viewed as harmless, and for the reason that the internet is often perceived as a place beyond strictures of social conventions and law.

That a change was underway was evident, given a resultant growing disconnect from his community, as attested to by the management of his own Mosque congregation: “The Association declares that this individual stopped attending the Mosque for about two months”¹¹. As a young Muslim convert from Quebec (Canada), Rouleau chose to take command of the course of his religious learning, and chart the course of religiosity he saw fit to take. With an assumed dismissal of any external manipulation, he literally took the risk of religious interpretation into his own hands, instead of adopting a rather safer position of religiosity by way of checking with the religious positions of mainstream Muslim Canadians.

Rouleau’s acquired preference for exclusion instead of inclusion, isolation rather than civic engagement, and self-guided learning instead of community instruction are reflective of his struggle at the time in an individual quest for personal and life meaning, pursuing a path supposedly ‘free’ from all sorts of external endorsement.

As seen in close testimonies, Rouleau conducted his prayers sometimes, with little contact with other worshippers. He was a reserved person, who often seemed sympathetic and kept a discreet profile.¹² Rouleau undoubtedly had concerns, doubts and misgivings, given his actions. He chose however, not to resolve them, but to act on them. Why did he abandon the very civility he was familiar with, one asks? Likely this was due to the constructed assumption that democracy poisons faith, or that his voice was too weak to be heard; in his mind offering no option but recourse to violence. Rouleau decided to take on a strange course of action, loaded with odd paradoxes and confusion, doubt, suspicion, anger, revenge and the rush of potential discovery. Amarasingam’s note highlights this internal turbulent process. He said: “From his online profile, he seemed like

⁸ Post, M. Jerrold. (2005). When hatred is bred in the bone: The Socio-Cultural Underpinnings of Terrorist Psychology. *Political Psychology*, 615-636.

⁹ Jillian, Kestler-D'Amours. (2014). *Muslim-Canadians decry attacks amid backlash*. www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/10/muslim-canadians-decry-attacks-amid-backlash-2014102692556982844.html. Accessed 16 December 2016.

¹⁰ Suler, John. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *Cyberpsychology and behavior*, Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. 7: 3, pp. 321-326.

¹¹ Communiqué de presse du 21 Octobre 2014. www.mosquealimane.com/781/=Communiqué de presse Évènement Tragique survenu à Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu le 20 Oct. 2014 (“L’association tient à préciser que cet individu ne fréquentait plus la mosquée depuis environ deux mois”). Oct. 2014

¹²Jillian, Kestler-D'Amours. *Muslim-Canadians decry attacks amid backlash*. 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/10/muslim-canadians-decry-attacks-amid-backlash-2014102692556982844.html> Accessed 16 December 2016.

a typical and fairly boring convert who was going through internal debates with Christian belief, with atheism, with secularism, and so on.”¹³

One may only conjecture as to what drove a new Muslim convert like Rouleau to fatal religious and intellectual adventure and to essentially stand ready to bear the consequences of possible misinterpretations. This may probably be seen through his own personal comportment or rather predisposition to carry out his own search and evaluation of life choices. It is evident of a general sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo, bolstered with distrust of the local Muslim community, or perhaps even manifested in creeping feelings of unwelcome, suspicion or even rejection, in view of the variances of culture and ethnicity of the Muslim community. One should also not ignore the effect of pervasive awareness in said communities of probing and surveillance held by Canadian intelligence, often seen as a necessity for the security, but nonetheless generating its own suppressed anxiety and mistrust which would have been debilitating for a convert in need of emotional stability, support and security.

Given the presented conditions, it was a simple matter for untargeted or targeted online radical influence to build a base level of sympathy through espoused alleged grievances, fine-tune the empathic sense of group identity, and follow through with pressure on the need for action in return for undying glory, meaning and eternal reward. In this context, Moghadam emphasizes the critical nature of ideology in eliciting sympathy or radicalizing existing sympathies by pointing to the pervasive ability of ideology in bridging the gap between belief and action by means of presenting a ‘cognitive’ blueprint that selectively distorts existing social realities, instead offering an alternate simplified reality easier to come to terms with and ascribe to¹⁴. Rouleau appears to have simply, albeit blindly, trusted in a simplified vision of longing for martyrdom (*shahada*) for God without allowing space for rational or cultural negotiation. He instead let himself be fully absorbed in those religious sentiments while according himself full authority to assess feasibility, terms of projection, convenience, and eventually set-up, and in doing so ensured that he would not divulge his plans by way of sharing his ideas or seeking counsel, given his tenuous position as an initiate to the religion. He rather acted as confident preacher, and established *mufti*.

Throughout, Rouleau was likely at ease with his emotional and intellectual changes in view of the prevalence and escalation of cases of religious-based suicides and killing, and his adoption of the verdict (*fatwa*) on the blanket need to resist Western dominance and injustice. Rouleau appears to have relied comfortably on many such online legal debates and jihadist *fatwas*; showing how deeply and emotionally submerged he was and the nature of the groups and forums he frequented. It also points to just how detached he had become from local and national problems; opting instead to study terrorist distortions and rationalizations, choosing to dismiss humanitarian concerns of communities abroad entirely, and only focus on those dictated by his virtual Shaykh and influencer as genuine and urgent. More specifically, Rouleau picked up a single domain of dedication; one justified under a paranoid, almost schizophrenic-sounding theory of world conspiracy against Muslims, coloured by a resultant accrued pain of all Muslims, and the ‘legitimate’ cause of ISIS’s struggle. That the self-radicalizing agent was a victim of cognitive disturbance in need of pre-emptive identification and targeted therapy is made unequivocal in the reality that all documented terrorists believe in some measure of grand conspiracies, and wallow to a certain extent in some measure of obsessive perceived persecution, the very belief in which is often a key requirement to carrying out violence¹⁵.

Ideology aside, one should nonetheless not naïvely exclude the effects resulting from Canada’s foreign policy towards the Middle East, specifically Harper’s pro-Israeli positions, and the reality of ongoing injustices, violence, and bloodshed. Foreign policy is in fact a prime motive for terrorism (Pillar)¹⁶. All these numerous

¹³ René, Bruemmer. *From typical teen to jihadist: How Martin Couture-Rouleau became radicalized after converting to Islam*. 2014. <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/11/09/from-typical-teen-to-jihadist-how-martin-couture-rouleau-became-radicalized-after-converting-to-islam/> (From typical teen to jihadist: How Martin Couture-Rouleau became radicalized after converting to Islam) a post-doctoral fellow at Dalhousie University’s Resilience Research Centre. Accessed 16 December 2016.

¹⁴ Moghadam, Assaf. (2008). The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology. *CTC Sentinel*, 1: 3, 14-16.

¹⁵ Lacqueur, W. (2001). Left, Right and Beyond: The Changing Face of Terror. In J. Hoge, & G. Rose (Eds.), *How Did This Happen? Terrorism and the New War*. Oxford: Public Affairs, pp. 71-82.

¹⁶ Pillar, P. (n.d.). The Democratic Defecit: The Need for Liberal Democratization. In Forest (Ed.), *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century*, Vol. 2, 42-55.

possibilities of exposure taken along with his decision to withdraw to virtual solitude however, do not by themselves satisfactorily justify the extreme intellectual and religious radical shift of Rouleau. One would have to probe further to detect any alternatives that could rationally justify the complete emotional and intellectual scenario resulting in Rouleau's thirst in vengeance from Canadian military personnel on Canadian soil. In the following we shed light on Rouleau's conversion first, followed by his radicalization, in view of existing theories that seek to offer a rational explanation for the major psychological changes following religious conversion.

Rouleau's Conversion to Islam

The story of Rouleau (Ahmad Le Converti) invokes a variety of problems underlying most of his radical transformations. With the assumption that Rouleau was somewhat immune to earlier psychological breakdowns, one would certainly wish to understand the general intellectual, social, personal and even financial crises endured throughout his conversion to Islam. Undeniably, Rouleau underwent critical transformations following his conversion to Islam in 2013¹⁷. In this section we accordingly highlight the practice of conversion to Islam, and the role of Muslim clergies (*imams*), as well as the position of the Muslim community in that regard. The proposed idea is that effective integration of Muslims, converts or not, is better served through effective institutional integration of the Muslim community at large; implying that any vacuum or fallout affecting those very communities, by means of their social and civic interrelation may, according to the same triggers which affected Rouleau, cause further imbalances, ideological distortions, and paranoid, irrational deformation, and damage to a long-standing socio-historical fabric.

The literature on Muslim religious conversion underscores numerous narratives, each projecting a certain spiritual, emotional and communal experience, yet with varied approaches to reporting on and analyzing conversion. For the purpose of this research, we propose to understand religious conversion according to the following integral equation: motives, catalysts, stewards, resources, and institutional climate. The question as to what essentially drives conversion is certainly open and carries no definite answer. For instance in his work on what motivated people to turn to Islam in the U.S., the author lists five main reasons for becoming Muslim: simplicity and rationality of the Islamic doctrine, equality of believers, practicality of religion, and absence of priesthood. These factors may for some be seen as merely parroting arguments of Muslim apologists used to propagate Islam.¹⁸ The reasons however, are nonetheless prevalent, and offer insight into Rouleau's frame of mind when joining the fold.

The study of conversion should nonetheless be held with an open mind as many reasons undeniably exist in leading people to change their faith, belief, and life systems; consisting of attraction to a certain faith, appealing principles, the effects of its adherents or perhaps partial disillusionment or dissatisfaction with one's own life trajectory and experience. The diversity of factors underlying religious conversion to Islam, as well as the dynamic nature of those very factors only reflect the general character of the human experience of life. They also represent elementary factors leading to decisions of change and transformation. Those very drivers are not static, but transform depending on the level of conscience, depth, and intensity of the formative experience. That itself implies that the driving force in conversion does not shape the outcome or impact of conversion alone; rather, it is an integral equation that largely and deeply contributes to the shaping of the intellectual, emotional and social make-up of Muslim converts or new Muslims.

The integral equation of conversion highlights a number of major drives behind conversion to Islam including intellectual curiosity, affective friendship, neighbourhood interaction, travel, marriage, business and so forth. The catalyst refers to the key person facilitating the process of conversion, and their input on the process. Imams (Muslim clergies) are generally considered highly effective catalysts. Stewardship involves individuals or groups that willingly choose to adopt Muslims converts and care for them for periods of time that may be short or extended. Their effects are lasting in view of the demanding and intensive nature of the care and assistance they offer. Stewardship is the care and personal support shown to new Muslims through their journey

¹⁷ Erica, Tucker, Who is Quebec terror-linked suspect Martin Rouleau? See <http://globalnews.ca/news/1626457/who-is-quebec-terror-linked-suspect-martin-rouleau/>. Global News. Accessed October 24 2014

¹⁸ Arab World Ministries. Why Are So Many Westerners Converting to Islam? <http://www1.cbn.com/spirituallife/why-are-so-many-westerners-converting-to-islam> Accessed January 2015.

of learning and growth, and often continues long after. Much of the converts' religious shaping and transformation presumably occurs during the early stage of embracing the faith; largely developed under through the guidance of the steward. Resource availability and accessibility as well as a positive institutional climate are critical to the religious and emotional well-being of converts; as they establish fundamental matrixes and a religious tone that ensures healthy positioning of their life and guides their future contributions, while ensuring control and a solid grasp of religion that prevents religious manipulation and negative experiences.

But first, an understanding of the atmosphere of conversion itself is necessary as it sheds light on possible influences and expectations arising from adopting the new faith and lifestyle. In general terms, Muslims tend to introduce their faith and values to the larger public while eschewing religious secrecy, seeking to demonstrate positive morality in the communal space. They also seek to enhance a climate of mutual understanding and appreciation with society at large, forging closer bonds with society as it best serves their own interests, those of their children, community and future. While such dreams are not always easily attainable given the damaging effects of terrorism, language barriers, media stereotyping, and so forth; Muslim institutions nonetheless strive tirelessly to share and familiarize knowledge of Islam, Muslim life, history, civilization, and culture with the public. Such an interest may certainly be interpreted as negative in view of the pluralistic and liberal nature of society, as well as the diversity of religious and moral choices to be found. Seen differently however, Muslim religious presence may also be seen as a positive religious, moral and social asset that enriches the Western religious, cultural and moral map with valuable future possibilities for shared growth and well-being.

It would likely be an erroneous judgement to assume uniformity or even similarity in the management of conversion across Muslim religious institutions in Canada, in view of the diversity of religious interpretations, juristic differences resulting from different schools of law, ethnicities and languages, styles of transmission of religious message, socio-cultural background of imams, perspectives on issues of tradition and modernity, political and religious affiliations of the organizations, and perhaps the management style as well. Nonetheless, it is safe to draw some common observations universal to all Muslim religious institutions. First, the process of religious conversion is viewed as a form of balanced re-integration instead of social segregation; a journey of intellectual, moral and spiritual cultivation rather than naïve transformation; and a new chapter of effective civic engagement that does away with destructive isolation. Muslim religious institutions generally urge new Muslims to protect and maintain bonds with family and society, highlighting positive engagement with identity, citizenship, support of social engagement, and general relations with society, culture and heritage.

Muslim religious conversion is simple, clear and straightforward¹⁹, and a joyful occasion for the community, yet a somewhat ordinary experience amidst the many routines of the organization/institution. Muslim converts are generally invited to slowly educate themselves on issues of religion, join existing classes on Islamic studies or the Arabic language, associate themselves with the Muslim community, volunteer in local organizations, and encouraged to maintain positive bonds with parents, relatives and society. New Muslims are also encouraged to take religion easy on themselves, and to be part of their new community. In many Mosques and religious institutions, they are given religious materials such as the Qur'an, booklets or leaflets on basic religious information such as prayer, morals, and science in the Quran.

Despite the invitations extended to new converts, their development generally boils down to individuals' efforts, and as such the educative process is often left unchecked by the community at large. In this respect, Imams generally represent critical keys whose introduction is decisive to the future attitude of converts, leaving a lasting impression on their religious experience and memories. There is nothing whatsoever to suggest that the practice of religious conversion could in any way possible be detrimental to Canadian citizenship. Imams in fact remind converts of the Quranic injunctions regarding the maintaining good relations with parents, families and relatives; showing kindness and virtue; doing one's best at work while accommodating one's religious duties and responsibilities, and perhaps quitting work in places involved in wine production, night clubs, bars, or casinos. Other than that, new converts are urged to adhere to a life of decency, responsibility, piety, and community.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Given however, the struggle faced by many Imams in terms of language competency, culture stress, poor presentation skills, little grasp of the prospect of conversion with respect to conscious social responsibility, community responsiveness, and citizenship engagement, the ideal Islamic conversion remains relatively poor, unfulfilled and inefficient. The point made here is that although basic Islamic teachings clearly exhort Muslims to keep ties with kinship and stay positive, on many occasions however, these injunctions are unfortunately poorly articulated, and as such ineffectively conveyed, especially given the already blurred or handicapped relationship bridging institutions with the broader civic society. In this respect, many Imams are in need of further developing their understanding of citizenship and articulating it more clearly if any sense of religious integration, sustainable civic inclusion or cohesive existence in pluralistic societies ought to happen or be instilled. On the other hand, as citizens, Imams should not report on any member of their congregation; as this would only downgrade their sense of responsible citizenship; but should rather be engaged in building Muslims' citizenship in a much more positive, constructive and sustainable manner. Their impact should not be downplayed to detecting or tracking abnormal behaviour in the congregation, but should instead be empowered as builders of the religious and civic identity they themselves should ideally have been developing in the first place. In other words, imams need to willingly yet forcefully engage the minds and hearts of their congregation in the cultivation of discipline and development of society, while certainly standing against all forms of extremism.

Canadian Muslim religious institutions such as ISNA, ICNA and others should review their plans with a mind towards improving and standardizing administrative approaches to conversion, especially with reference to identifying the community-self, outlining religious and communal expectations, implementing uniform elementary religious courses, alongside ready plans for converts' social and civic engagement, and the requisite mechanisms for handling various issues and changes associated with conversion. Though highly critical, these necessities undoubtedly lie beyond the financial and human capacity of many Islamic Centers in Canada initially established for small religious functions including the holding of a few daily prayers. This rightly implies that not all religious institutions qualify for the professional, matured and effective administration of religious conversion; even given that no formal institutionalization of conversion is religiously required, as the conversation may be held in private away from the public. In pluralistic societies however, such practices should not be viewed as purely religious devoid of input and support from society at large; but should rather be enhanced to maximize religious inclusion, and set a sustainable basis for religious pluralism in altogether tolerant, pluralistic and effective societies.

Rouleau's actions draws attention to a complex set of dimensions affecting the community life and dynamics of Muslim converts in the West in general; further underscores a terrible institutional failure in the Muslim community as manifested in insignificant and marginal contribution by new Muslims to the overall improvement of Muslim life in general. This prompts a critical review of the example of Rouleau and others, and how they failed to capitalize on their intrinsic culture and values, language, social network, and citizenship. In this respect, they could have firmly embedded such advantages in the communities sharing their newly found faith and moral system; serving themselves, their community and ensuring sustainability of the prized harmonious Canadian cultural/religious mosaic. In light of such potential, what might cause converts such as Rouleau and others to instead adopt a state best described as passive, reconciliatory and non-challenging to Muslim institutions? Again, this raises the need to review the position and engagement of Muslim converts altogether, and more specifically their access, presence, and role in the fine weaving of their culture and principles with their new faith, eventually to the betterment of Muslim religious institutions.

Rouleau's Self-Radicalization

Radicalization is defined as a personal process in which individuals adopt extreme political, social, and/or religious ideals and aspirations, and where the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence²⁰. It is characterized as both a mental and emotional process that prepares and motivates an individual to pursue violent behaviour. According to Brian Michael Jenkins, radicalization is the internalization of a 'set of

²⁰ Alex S. Wilner & Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz. (2010). *Homegrown terrorism and transformative learning: an interdisciplinary approach to understanding radicalization*. In *Global Change Peace & Security*. Taylor & Francis, p. 7.

beliefs, a militant mindset that embraces violent jihad as the paramount test of one's conviction'²¹. Self-radicalization however, should be examined in light of various other triggers, direct and indirect, resulting from religious interpretation, among a host of numerous other effective agents. Catalysts, instigators, irritators, and constructed pseudo-'religious' perceptions, alongside other additional factors are in need of clear identification for any further objective analysis to be conducted, or accepted.

An assessment of various reported models of radicalization led Silber and Bhatt, senior intelligence analysts of the NYPD Intelligence Division at the New York City Police Department to the conclusion that radicalization is composed of four distinct phases: pre-radicalization, self-identification, indoctrination, and *jihadization*. According to their assessment, each of these phases is unique and characterized by specific signatures. More critically, individuals who embark on this process do not necessarily progress past all stages. Many stop or abandon the process at different points. At times, individuals are not always found to follow a perfectly linear progression. Those who do pass through this entire process are quite likely to be involved in the planning or implementation of a terrorist act²². Helfstein finds that the process of self-radicalization consists of four stages, namely, awareness, interest, acceptance, and implementation. For him, 'awareness' may be a long-term process that occurs and accrues over time as an individual's knowledge of radical ideology and tactics deepens. Interest is defined as "the willingness to alter one's belief system or social norms to reflect those associated with an ideological doctrine"²³.

Helfstein argues that current evidence clearly indicates that self-radicalization is not a linear process but rather an "iterative" development within the individual that may contain feedback loops²⁴. For Helfstein, developing awareness is relatively simple, but gaining the deeper interest described above is far more challenging. Recruitment focuses on moving prospective participants from mere interest to fully-fledged acceptance, as following acceptance, there is "a tendency to reduce cognitive dissonance"²⁵ by proceeding directly to violent action.

Radicalization ensnares its subjects in a web of ideological and personal incentives targeting soft-spots such as the need to belong, the search for significance, meaning, self-righteous identity or a just cause. Due to the altering nature of the psychological milestones the target may pass through, it is often difficult to make a return to balanced normalcy²⁶. This may not hold entirely true however, in the case of passively targeted self-radicalized individuals. In cases of group-centered radicalization, brainwashing begins with imposed isolation, planted mistrust of outsiders and so on. In the case of the self-radicalizing 'lone wolf', this process is haphazard, and is compelled by the psychological, personal or emotional imbalance that afflicts them. The likelihood of success of community, family and spiritual in an intervention success is arguably much higher, as they are best positioned to identify the problematic vacuum and provide warm, meaningful alternatives. This in itself is a positive note, indicating potential in investments requiring an assessment of community support, counselling and follow-up mechanisms; and emphasizing the potential for friendly, transparent integrated security-community collaboration, and smart 'treatment' of such cases.

The summary of studies shown above probe the processes of self-radicalization through careful study of characteristics of the phenomenon, with a view towards individuals' sequential development along the path of their transformation, culminating in resorts to extremism and violence. There is more however, to the radicalization process than a basic knowledge of broad categories of individual progression. What these studies fail to address is the shift in perspective of meaning, or individual ideological narrative, that is to say the individual's cognitive construction of new definitions of self and behaviour parallel to their usual self and prior held convictions, that are specifically associated with radicalization and violent action.

²¹ Brian M. Jenkins. (2007). *Building an Army of Believers: Jihadist Radicalization and Recruitment* (Testimony, US House of Representatives, April 5, 2007). California, USA: The RAND Corporation. p. 2.

²² Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt. (2007). *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat*. NYPD Intelligence Division. New York City Police Department, USA. p. 6.

²³ Helfstein, Scott. (2012). *Edges of radicalization: Ideas, individuals and networks in violent extremism*. West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, p. 16.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 19

²⁶ O' Neill, B., & Alberts, D. J. (2007). Responding to Psychological, Social, Economic and Political Roots of Terrorism, in J. J. Forest (ed.), *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century International Perspectives*, (Vol. II), 305-324.

Mezirow offers yet another advanced perspective explaining individuals' personal change and shows how it represents a product of mental and cognitive processes of transformation. According to him, following a moment of personal crisis (the trigger), an individual tries to make sense of the event using his or her 'habitual ways' of thinking (pre-existing meaning schemes). At times, the individual will realize that habitual ways of thinking are not helpful in managing the crisis (distortions). The individual reacts by exploring new ways of thinking (critical reflection) which involves a transformation in meaning perspectives through the attainment of new knowledge and skills. Eventually, the individual establishes competence and self-confidence in his or her new role, evident in novel behaviour reflective of the individual's changed perspective. The transformative process, explains Mezirow, involves ten sequential phases: Experiencing a disorienting dilemma; Self-examination (with feelings of guilt, anger, shame); Critically assessing assumptions; Recognizing that personal 'discontent' and transformation are shared and by no means limited to the individual; Exploring 'new roles, relationships, and actions'; Establishing a course of action; Acquiring new knowledge or skills for implementing the new course; Provisionally 'trying new roles'; Building self-confidence in new roles; and Reintegrating into 'one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective'²⁷.

The use of Mezirow's approach is certainly helpful towards a better comprehension of the process self-radicalization but does not fully capture the entire sequence of changes, leaving aside critical factors and triggers that potentially affect or initiate one's radical cognitive and emotional transformation. Close attention to Rouleau's changes may lead us to propose a causal trigger-oriented frame of analysis that seeks to capture the most fundamental ingredients catalyzing and effecting self-radicalization, eventually heightening the speed of the process and action as well. This approach involves close attention to the following factors: 1) time, 2) space, 3) personal immunity, 4) intensity of the trigger, 5) efficacy of institutions, and 6) open categories of combined different variables.

Taking these factors into attention, we may suggest a frame of analysis that assumes a proportionate relationship between the effects of each of these factors on the very process of self-radicalization. Time for instance would involve the sum total of military actions of Western alliances and coalitions in campaigns against Muslim targets and the corresponding intensity of media and stereotyping against Muslims. Prescott's statement highlights this point well: "If I was a young Muslim watching the social injustice in Gaza where 2,000 people died in a matter of weeks from Israeli bombings, the displacement of millions of people in Syria and the US using drone missiles to target terrorist suspects but kill innocent families, I'm sure I could be radicalised too."²⁸

Space here would be related to a religious and cultural context including acquaintances, freedom and social milieu. The causal trigger here would involve the sort of legal verdict offered up by ISIS compounded by appeals for sacrifice, reprisal, alongside 'binding' religious obligations towards Islam and towards the nation. Immunity may be considered the level of education and knowledge of the person, and as a general holding rule those vulnerable to brainwashing and external influence are often those with a poor knowledge base and defined sense of self. Institutional effectiveness in turn refers to an institution's ability to engage citizens in decently inclusive, productive and meaningful activities, or offer an effective counter-narrative to radical ideologies and violent extremism. These factors are also in addition to open categories that embrace other no less important factors such as personal history, crises, acquaintances, employment, family and so forth. This frame of reference is also useful as it helps in assessing and handling potentials threat in a much more systematic, tangible and sustainable format instead of falling into the numerous pitfalls associated with fragmented intelligence collection, and the uncertainty and chance associated with HUMINT, alongside unjustified racial profiling which may at times, as was the case with Rouleau, be a trigger itself to self-radicalization.

²⁷ Jack Mezirow, 'Epistemology of Transformative Learning' (paper presented at the International Conference on Transformative Learning, 2003); Jack Mezirow, 'Transformation Theory of Adult Learning', in *In Defense of the Lifeworld: Critical Perspectives on Adult Learning*, ed. Michael Welton (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 45-52; Wilner, Alex S., and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz. "Homegrown terrorism and transformative learning: an interdisciplinary approach to understanding radicalization." *Global Change, Peace & Security* 22, no. 1 (2010): 46.

²⁸ John, Prescott. (2015). "It wasn't just Jihadi John that radicalised young Muslims - it's our fault to". Retrieved from [Mirror: http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/john-prescott-wasnt-just-jihadi-5379157](http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/john-prescott-wasnt-just-jihadi-5379157). Accessed May 2015.

Rouleau's case shows an intense prevalence of the triggers shown above, indicating a case of instability and definite reactionary strike. All triggers were strongly present, with no rationally containing method. In the words of Antoine Lavoisier: "Nothing is lost, nothing is created, and everything is transformed". All factors small or large are materialized and substantiated into certain forms of action, good or bad; relative only to the nature of the catalyzing triggers. Nothing should be seen as inherently neutral in the understanding of Rouleau's self-radicalization; as nothing is free of causal cost or devoid of significance, including cultural pluralism, democratic education, and even free virtual instruction, which is not without its hidden strings. Likewise, racial profiling, media stereotyping, and public anti-minority incitement has potential to generate unrest, a dislocated sense of public mistrust, and even perhaps bring about a minimum or reserved degree of social engagement. Intelligence collaboration with Mosque Imams and supervisors, or the use of traditional HUMINT collection techniques may be equally detrimental to social and civic cohesion, and may reinforce further suspicion, mistrust, isolation, and ideological rejection of government and civil society; including one's own religious and community institutions.

Specifically, this includes policies denying citizens the right of travel for undisclosed non-explicit reasons, suspension of their citizenship, and debating or even questioning the right of their return to their homeland, which may only fuel their sense of frustration, anger, isolation, and sense of targeted and unjust deprivation. More critically, this has potential to perhaps develop an unconscious thirst for reprisal and retaliation. Unarguably, the RCMP's decision to seize Rouleau's passport²⁹, at least from Rouleau's perspective, was a major and intrusive interference into his life and personal sphere, and a serious violation of his citizenship³⁰. In such a context, it may easily be inferred that it caused him mixed yet conflicting feeling of identity, resulting in a deteriorated, distorted bond and self-identification with both the land and his fellow citizens; in all likelihood, it may have even hastened his self-radicalization³¹. It is from this perspective that one understands the essential flaw in the poorly parroted argument that self-radicalization is nothing but the product of extremist religious discourse among Canadian Muslim institutions.

Rouleau's Set-up

Rouleau's sensitivity to the geo-political climate in the Middle East, particularly to ISIL³² was fulfilled, albeit in the absence of an external *verificateur* which resulted in an intense breakdown and vulnerability to radicalization. As noted: "He became an extremist. He wanted to go fight jihad but they would not let him do it. The caliphate called all the Muslims on earth to fight. He listened to what they had to say and he did his part here."³³ His emotional conditions were certainly alarming, and his antisocial withdrawal from friends, family and community is only one aberration reflecting his gradual violent indoctrination. In the aftermath, security officials tried to explain how difficult it is to predict the rare shift from merely troubled or radicalized to the homicidal, particularly in an individual who appears to have been self-taught off the Internet. RCMP spokesman

²⁹ "The RCMP revealed Tuesday Rouleau had had his passport seized and was one of 90 suspected extremists being investigated because they intended to join fights abroad, or who have returned to Canada having already done so." John, Ivison. (2014). In response to Quebec terror attack we must remember a healthy balance between security and freedom. www.news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/john-ivison-in-response-to-quebec-terror-attack-we-must-remember-a-healthy-balance-between-security-and-freedom. Accessed November 2015.

³⁰ The issue of individuals seeking to travel abroad to participate in terrorist activity remains a concern to the RCMP, as they represent a threat not only to the international community, but to Canada and its allies as well. The key to the early detection of such threats resides within a collaborative approach. We continue to work diligently with our partners and our communities to prevent individuals from engaging in terrorist activity, to detect those who are planning criminal acts and to deny perpetrators the means and opportunities to pursue their plots. (Statement: Sentencing of Mohamed Hassan Hersi (Project Severe). Royal Canadian Mounted Police. www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/news-nouvelles/speeches-stat-discours-decl/2014/07-24-hersi-eng.htm. Accessed December 2014.

³¹ "One more person to watch in Canada RCMP Commissioner Bob Paulson touched on the problem Tuesday on Parliament Hill: asked whether it was possible Couture-Rouleau became more dangerous after his passport was taken away, Paulson said "Certainly that's what follows from the analysis." See Laura Payton. (2014). CBC News, Martin Couture-Rouleau case underscores passport seizure dilemma, Hit-and-run driver blocked from leaving Canada in months before alleged terror attack. www.cbc.ca/news/politics/martin-couture-rouleau-case-underscores-passport-seizure-dilemma-1.2807239). November 2014.

³² A Twitter account under the name Ahmad Rouleau featured the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham. See Steward Bell, *Soldier dies after being run down in suspected terror attack near Montreal*. National Post. www.news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/driver-who-ran-into-canadian-soldiers-near-montreal-was-known-to-counter-terrorism-officials-rcmp. November 2014.

³³ Allan, Woods. (2014). Martin Rouleau 'died like he wanted to'. Thestar.com, www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/10/20/martin_rouleau_died_like_he_wanted_to.html. November 2014.

Sgt. Luc Thibault said: "It depends on the type of radicalization.... You are allowed to have radical thoughts. It's only when overt threats are made that the police can intervene."³⁴ He further states that those are difficult threats to detect as there are no ways of knowing where or when such an attack could take place.³⁵ The RCMP states that Mr. Couture-Rouleau was identified as a high-risk traveller and put on a watch list as a possible Islamic extremist. They had spoken to him as recently as the same month of the tragic murder but had no grounds to arrest him. "We could not arrest someone for having radical thoughts. It's not a crime in Canada," RCMP Supt. Martine Fontaine said at a press conference.³⁶

Rouleau's pursuit for legal justification (*fatwa*) was hardly a challenge, as he had already secured his favourable religious authority, even when his ideas were rejected altogether by Muslim jurist-counsels and imams in Canada and elsewhere. None would have been able to justify the crime of a hit and run and killing of innocent military personnel. His *virtual Shaykh* [Enseignant] however, pleasantly did. In his virtual space, Rouleau was at ease to plan for a coup he himself imagined; within the options available to him in Quebec following his failure to leave Canada. His drive to kill persisted but was only disguised; it was simply a tactical change of places, waging war in a different theatre so to speak. Rouleau's poor decision however, is reflective of a great amount of disturbance, urgency, imbalance, and certainly immaturity. His decision demonstrates the perfect case of religious fall from grace, personal confusion, egoism, arrogance, negligence, elements of a saviour's complex, and certainly a terrible sense of despair. His issue was precisely directed against the Canadian military but not the public; his target was defined, specific for this reason, '*justified*' in his mind. Rouleau's plan was to enact revenge for Muslims' blood shed by Western perpetrators including the Canadian Armed Forces. His intention was not to die as *martyr* or to sacrifice 'Big Mart', but rather to live on, perhaps in prison with a new nickname honoured by heroism worth the sacrifice.

Rouleau appears not have given his coup's adventure serious thought, and in his tunnel vision likely forget the implications this might have for him, his family, community and society. As the hour of the terror attack drew near, Rouleau likely shut down all avenues of self-negotiation for his peace of mind, likely downplaying the repercussions of attacking members of the Canadian Armed Forces. Rouleau's plan was simple, arguably '*primitive*', and poor by the standards of current sophisticated terrorist attacks. This simplicity is reflective of his simple and literal reaction to ISIL's global plan of attacking Western military targets. Irrespective of the simplicity of his planning however, ISIL's verdict alone, under normal conditions, would not have been able to hijack the identity of a citizen like Rouleau. Other equally powerful and compounding triggers were present that contributed critically to Rouleau's final set-up plan. The theory asserting a random impulsive plan occurring without pre-meditation also remains plausible. Having been pressured to take action due to exposure to various internet sources, religious literature, and ongoing NATO military strikes against ISIL, Rouleau's decision to hit and run was hastened, but more importantly miscalculated.

Anticipating the reactions of suspects is ordinarily full of speculation and never a sure process. For so long as one miscalculates the effective power of triggers, one may can never close in on a valid prediction of any possible strike, the reason being is that superficially to say the least, suspects are disguised with peace and understanding, and as such provide security officials with relaxed space to operate free from the sense of imminent threat. In this case, much of Rouleau's religious zealotry, disillusionment with Canada, and suspicions towards his own religious community were all evident. In pluralistic countries like Canada, it is both painful, hurtful, and stressful to lose one's rights of expression, mobility, action, and citizenship. For Rouleau, beginning to lose those very basic constitutional rights clearly hastened his decision, and catalyzed his anger into an immature, egoistic, and tragic act of vengeance.

34 René Bruemmer. (2014). From typical teen to jihadist: How Martin Couture-Rouleau became radicalized after converting to Islam. National Post. www.news.nationalpost.com/2014/11/09/from-typical-teen-to-jihadist-how-martin-couture-rouleau-became-radicalized-after-converting-to-islam/. Accessed November 2014.

35 Royal Canadian Mounted Police. (2014). Update on yesterday's tragic events. www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/news-nouvelles/speeches-stat-discours-decl/2014/20141023-eng.htm. Accessed November 2014.

36 Peritz, Ingrid. (2016). *Father of Couture-Rouleau says government must strengthen security laws*. 2014. www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/father-of-couture-rouleau-says-government-must-strengthen-security-laws/article21308978/. Accessed Dec. 20th 2014.

Averting terrorist plots can to a large extent be contained by means of the effective presence and role of institutions; which may provide effective yet sustainable management of the various issues of marginalization, isolation, radicalization, extremism, or terrorism, as it leverages power in favour of individuals' and groups' engagement towards building society as opposed to falling prey to ideologies of hate and revenge. Moreover, the approach of constructivist institutionalism can further build a culture of communicative socialization, responsibility, accountability, and positivity. An obstacle confronts this possibility however, given the share of Muslim religious institutions, many of whom appear to be ill-prepared for people such as Rouleau, and consequently score poorly in ensuring effective religious and spiritual well-being of a Muslim congregation, let alone building and ushering in systematic social and political integration. The fact remains that performance of the basic religious, community and civic services score generally below average. Often times, Muslim religious clerics (*imams*) and directors are caught in limbo; on the one hand, they seek to satisfy the needs of national security and urgent exigencies of security officials, the challenges of diverse ethnicities and affiliations, and worse perhaps, the financial burdens placed on their religious establishments. Al-Imane Center of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu³⁷, on the Boulevard of Séminaire³⁸, provides us with a prime example of how Muslim religious institutions literally fail to attend to the real yet dynamic needs of their own congregations.

In the little Mosque of al-Imane, we are informed of three or four local Muslim converts. We however, lack information on their gender, age, and position in al-Imane, or their commitment to the Mosque's programs and outreach, or their connection or interaction with Rouleau. Clearly this mosque was not privileged with a full-time religious clergy (*imam*)³⁹ which speaks volumes of poor if not altogether absent religious administration, reference, authority, and proper guidance. The absence of these institutional functions certainly caused a general vacuum crippling congregational ineffectiveness and perhaps imbalance. Rouleau could have likely attached himself to a different place of worship, where his genuinely growing religious, intellectual and social needs would have been served better; but that, perhaps might have been difficult, given the effort involved in searching out and finding another institution during the long cold winter of Quebec.

Rouleau used to attend the Prayer of Dawn, which is a general indication of religious devotion and spiritual awakening. He attended congregation in the Mosque of al-Imane three times a week on average, but stopped coming two months before the attack. According to Bekkari, Rouleau only prayed in the mosque for about a year, and mostly attended the prayer of dawn. Abdel Hamid Bekkari [the mosque President] noted that he could not detect any changes in Rouleau's physical appearance or discourse. This statement does not carry much weight since this mosque already lacked the basic structure of guidance, support, education, and most significantly the vision for community engagement and civic and social responsibility. In fact, Bekkari's point that this very place of worship was open to all in itself reflects the heart of the problem⁴⁰. He said: "The mosque doors are open to everyone"⁴¹. While the Mosque's open-door policy is definitely tantamount to religious welcomeness, the context of the statement is more aimed at dismissing any tie or culpability with Rouleau, and may even be seen as a weakness, negligence and inattention to the general changes affecting their congregation. This comes as part of the reaction to the incident. For instance, the Islamic centre in St-Jean said the [Muslim] community firmly condemned this [event], and affirmed that this type of crime does not have a religion, colour, or country. In general, our co-citizens in the town of St-Jean were able to take a step back from this event and

³⁷ Al-Imane Center is by definition a *musallah* located in a strip mall to meet the basic needs of the neighbouring community including the communal prayer of Muslims in the area.

³⁸ Philippe Teisceira-Lessard. (2014). Saint-Jean: un agent de la GRC fréquentait la même mosquée. www.lapresse.ca/actualites/dossiers/attentat-a-st-jean-sur-richelieu/2014/10/20/01-4811074-saint-jean-un-agent-de-la-grc-frequentait-la-meme-mosquee.php. La Presse.CA. Accessed November 2014.

³⁹ According to Teisceira-Lessard, célébrations were led alternatively by members of the congregation. Also, the Mosque did not have an official Imam and prayers were led by ordinary Mosque attendees. See Philippe Teisceira-Lessard. (2014). Saint-Jean: un agent de la GRC fréquentait la même mosquée. www.lapresse.ca/actualites/dossiers/attentat-a-st-jean-sur-richelieu/2014/10/20/01-4811074-saint-jean-un-agent-de-la-grc-frequentait-la-meme-mosquee.php. La Presse.CA. Accessed November 2014.

⁴⁰ According to Bekkari, the Mosque is a place for everyone to come. The door is open to everyone, added Mr. Bekkari. There are about three or four Quebecers converts). See, Philippe Teisceira-Lessard. (2014). Saint-Jean: un agent de la GRC fréquentait la même mosquée. www.lapresse.ca/actualites/dossiers/attentat-a-st-jean-sur-richelieu/2014/10/20/01-4811074-saint-jean-un-agent-de-la-grc-frequentait-la-meme-mosquee.php. La Presse.CA. Accessed November 2014.

⁴¹ Jillian Kestler-D'Amours. (n.d). Muslim-Canadians decry attacks amid backlash. www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/10/muslim-canadians-decry-attacks-amid-backlash-2014102692556982844.html. Accessed December 2014.

disassociate the criminal act from religion”⁴². Bekkari states: “D’ailleurs, l’association participe activement dans différentes activités sociales et de bénévolat de la ville et organise régulièrement des occasions d’échange avec nos concitoyens.”⁴³

Disturbing however, is the RCMP-GRC agent, who according to Bekkari, was a regular attendee in this Mosque, managed Rouleau’s file and used to monitor him closely. We are told that this agent was of Moroccan descent, who lived in Saint-Jean, and who had spoken with Rouleau on many occasions (*a parlé plusieurs fois*)⁴⁴. The identity of this agent remains unknown. This information is confirmed by other members of the Mosque.⁴⁵ According to Bekkari, at least one RCMP officer was attending the same mosque and keeping an eye on Rouleau. This officer – of Moroccan ancestry – “lives with us in Saint-Jean,” spoke with Rouleau “on many occasions,” and “had his file.” The congregation leader did not want to identify him. Following the attack, a journalist from Montreal La Presse went to inquire at the mosque attended by Martin Ahmad Rouleau. In order to demonstrate that everything was fine at the mosque, its president told the journalist that an RCMP-GRC officer of Moroccan ancestry living in Saint-Jean, was a regular of the mosque. How could there be a problem with the mosque if a law enforcement officer or agent was a regular there? Correct?⁴⁶

While this was presented as evidence of RCMP-GRC’s proactive security measures; this piece of information is rather alarming in and of itself, especially if Rouleau was aware of being monitored and under surveillance for his religious activities and attachment to the community. If said assumption is in fact true, Rouleau would have eventually realized that his freedom and religious rights were being jeopardized in places where one’s devotion to God should essentially remain free from human interference. That being the assumption, Rouleau would have slowly lost interest in any communal bonding, increased his desire for non-socialization, and paranoidly avoided acquaintances, even with other Muslim converts like him.

In the context of this inquiry, this issue raises even more critical concerns especially in relation to the capacity of colleagues whose known identity combines a number of functions including security, religious fellowship, counselling, and so on. One would be curious to understand the communication approach used to relate to Rouleau or convince him of any idea; how professional was this agent’s overall comportment; how strategic and tactful was the oversight he operated under, and how thorough was his personal education and training on complex issues of religion, extremism, the psychology of religious conversion, Islamic theological and legal debate, inter-cultural sensitivity, and so forth. If no such specialized training and thorough education exists for security and law enforcement practitioners, demand certainly calls for its creation. Issues such as these draw further attention to the very system of recruitment and assignment used, and the implicit need for strict boundaries between collection of intelligence, surveillance and religious interference, not to mention evaluation of security practices, monitoring strategies, as well as exhaustive checking and cross-checking of facts when managing suspicious individuals.

Give the minimal information on intelligence gathering practices available to the public, one hopes that the RCMP used strategies aside from overt, obvious, conventional methods, in a manner that would have better handled the case of Rouleau. While the sense of security requires necessary and reasonable degrees of alertness, inquiry and surveillance, in view of the confusion around the real triggers affecting Rouleau, one may to say the least, tentatively point to the negative effects of stress affecting Rouleau’s case, particularly a typified sense of

⁴² Social engagement of the mosque. www.mosqueealimane.com/781/. Accessed Nov. 2014

⁴³ Le Collectif Québécois Contre l’Islamophobie. (2014). Communiqué de Presse du 21 Octobre 2014. www.mosqueealimane.com/781/Communiqué_de_presse «Évènement Tragique survenu à Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu le 20 Oct. 2014. Accessed Nov. 2014

⁴⁴ ‘Fréquentait la même mosquée et avait Rouleau à l’oeil, a ajouté Abdel Hamid Bekkari. Cet agent - d’origine marocaine -«habite à Saint-Jean avec nous’, ‘a parlé plusieurs fois» à Martin Rouleau et «avait son dossier’. See Philippe Teisceira-Lessard. (2014). Saint-Jean: un agent de la GRC fréquentait la même mosquée. www.lapresse.ca/actualites/dossiers/attentat-a-st-jean-sur-richelieu/201410/20/01-4811074-saint-jean-un-agent-de-la-grc-frequentait-la-meme-mosquee.php. La Presse.CA. Accessed November 2014

⁴⁵ ‘This information is confirmed by two other congregation members’ (Cette information est confirmée par deux autres fidèles). See Philippe Teisceira-Lessard. (2014). Saint-Jean: un agent de la GRC fréquentait la même mosquée. www.lapresse.ca/actualites/dossiers/attentat-a-st-jean-sur-richelieu/201410/20/01-4811074-saint-jean-un-agent-de-la-grc-frequentait-la-meme-mosquee.php. La Presse.CA. Accessed November 2014.

⁴⁶ Pamela, Geller. (2014). The Mosque Behind the Jihadist Who Struck and Killed Soldiers in Canada. www.pamelageller.com/2014/10/the-mosque-behind-the-jihadist-who-struck-and-killed-soldiers-in-canada.html/#sthash.2eiPM78V.dpuf. Accessed November 2014.

suspicion and frustration in light of a shallow religious institutional system, anxiety resulting from the interference of religious colleagues, despair from his sensitivity to Middle Eastern conditions, and the added feeling of loneliness, victimisation, and jeopardization of freedom. To a certain degree, this demonstrates multifaceted institutional deterioration, and existence of multiple failures in dominant religious and media discourse to recognise real triggers affecting radicalization, and even worse, our own dysfunctional yet triggering approaches which fuel individuals' favour for global networks of terrorism; choosing to forget their ability for enhancing multiculturalism, cherishing citizenship, or increasing the ranks of the ever standing guard of a proud Canadian nation and its interests.

The Call of The Caliph⁴⁷

On the fourth of July 4th 2014, Dr. Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim, better known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi⁴⁸ issued his controversial fatwa calling for global jihad. In his letter he shows surprise at Canada's decision to join the military coalition against ISIL. "What does Canada have anything to do with you?" Using fiery rhetoric, al-Baghdadi invites his reader to join him in Jihad and die as a martyr or be victorious, expounding: 'If he survives, he lives as a victor with freedom, might, honour, and authority. And if he is killed, he illuminates the path for those after him and goes on to his Lord as a joyful martyr'. The chief ideologue and commander of ISIL selected a conflict-based approach to history to refresh an old archetype of crusaders returned and their patterns of aggression: "The crusaders have returned with a new campaign". The new Caliph promises his followers a glorious, aggrandized future, posturing: 'We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women'. Soon however, he realizes the need to be realistic and paint the elusive promise of such a future: 'If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market'.

The pseudo-Caliph's strategy was clear; seeking to instill a debilitating level of fear and insecurity among Americans, Europeans, and their allies: 'you will pay the price as you walk on your streets, turning right and left, fearing the Muslims. You will not feel secure even in your bedrooms; we will strike you in your homeland'. This is strange even for terrorist ideology which rarely refers to explicit revenge, but makes use of socioeconomic, religious, and political grievances, citing victimized oppression, humiliation, and injustice⁴⁹. ISIL seems to have graduated beyond the meek self-victimization and pained group-consciousness usually so effective at eliciting a bare minimum of sympathy to the legitimacy of terrorist causes. In this case, aggressive threats have as much to do with frightening the audience as they have to do with impressing potential recruits.

The self-appointed Caliph returns to a global justification of his cause, reminding audiences of injustices and atrocities committed against Muslims over the world like Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Burma, Nigeria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, India, China, the Caucasus, and elsewhere. The argument made here is the textbook recruiting hook, essentially that Muslims all over the globe are subject to injustice, and in need of the defence and protection of an Islamic State: 'a state emerged for the Muslims that would defend them, take revenge for them, and carry out retribution'. In view of this, al-Baghdadi encourages Muslims from all across the globe to migrate to the new Islamic State in Iraq and Levant. One of his prime examples was a Canadian ISIL fighter, by the name of Abu Muslim al-Canadi. Al-Baghdadi repeats his invitation again: 'Come and join us [in Syria] before the doors close... it suffices to repeat the words of the Prophet Muhammad who said: There is no emigration after the conquest [of Makkah], but Jihad and [its] intention [remain], and when you are called, march forward'. Broadening his defensive call on a global scale context was a tactic used to recruit global *mujahids* who could serve his agenda:

⁴⁷ Yara, Bayoumy. (2014). ISIS urges more attacks on Western 'disbelievers'. The Independent. Accessed September 2014. Abu Mohammad al-Adnani. (2014). Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful. *Archive.org*. Al-Furqan Media Productions. Accessed September 2014.

⁴⁸ Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Samarrai al-Badri known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is born in the year of 1971 in a religious family that belongs to the clan of al-Badri in the city of Samarra in Iraq. According to British Telegraph, al-Baghdadi moved to the neighborhood of al-Tabagi when he was eighteen of age. He obtained his Bachelor and Master's degrees in Islamic studies, and in 2000, got his PhD in Islamic Law from the University of Islamic Studies. See Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Aljazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/icons> <http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/icons/2014/12/2>. Accessed December 2014.

⁴⁹ Forest, J. J. (2009). Influence Warfare and Modern Terrorism. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 81-89.

O *muwahhidin* [believers] in Europe, America, Australia, and Canada... Morocco and Algeria... Khorasan, the Caucasus, and Iran... O *muwahhidin* everywhere upon the face of the earth... O brothers in creed... O you who have loved the Islamic State... O you who support the Caliphate... O you who consider yourselves from amongst its soldiers and patrons... Your state is facing a new campaign by the crusaders. So O *muwahhid*, wherever you may be, what are you going to do to support your brothers? O *muwahhid*, we call upon you to defend the Islamic State. Dozens of nations have gathered against it. They began their war against us at all levels. So rise O *muwahhid*. Rise and defend your state from your place wherever you may be. Rise and defend your Muslim brothers, for their homes, families, and wealth are threatened and deemed lawful by their enemies. They are facing a battle which is of the decisive, critical battles in the history of Islam.

On a note more relevant to the case at hand however, polarized views are often attractive to the disillusioned by virtue of the simplified 'us against them' rhetoric. Such views and their accompanying ideology are nearly without fail, uncompromisingly critical of the status quo and powers that be, finding in their blame a cathartic coping mechanism for all perceived ills and injustices, or as Post puts it more aptly, the "psycho-politics of hatred"⁵⁰.

Counting on a bare minimum of sympathy, or emotional and psychological investment, radical influencers are rarely pushy, often calling for a minimum of investment according to each potential recruit or target's psychological willingness or stage of progression. This is epitomized in the words of Muhammed bin Ahmed al-Salem, also known through the pseudonym Abu Bakr Naji: 'From each according to his ability'. ISIL and the approach taken by al-Baghdadi's rhetoric seem contrary to this, far more explicit, and highly demanding; keeping in line with the group's tactics and propaganda. In his speech, he sought to instigate and fan the flames of increased anger and eventually reactionary strikes to as many of his targets as possible 'You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the *tawaghit*. Strike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents'. Another tactic used was to raise a terrible sense of inner religious urgency: 'how can you enjoy life and sleep while not aiding your brothers, not casting fear into the hearts of the cross worshippers, and not responding to their strikes with multitudes more?' His call was to kill Americans, Europeans—the French especially—, Australians, Canadians, and any other disbelievers in the coalition against ISIL. His only need was to see enemies killed; the manner and method hardly mattered: 'kill him in any manner or way however it may be'. His call however, waxed specific when he dictated a concrete set-up of revenge: 'Disperse those behind them wherever you may find them. Rig the roads with explosives for them. Attack their bases. Raid their homes. Cut off their heads. Do not let them feel secure. Hunt them wherever they may be. Turn their worldly life into fear and fire'. Even worse, he encourages his followers and sympathizers all over to kill any citizen of the military coalition indiscriminately 'Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling' while proposing specific criminal acts including shooting with a gun, smashing the head, murdering with a knife, running over with a car, pushing one from high up, strangling the person or poisoning.

Al-Baghdadi's fatal mistake was to legitimize the absolute unconditional spilling of blood: 'The blood of disbeliever is like that of a dog; there is no sin for him in spilling it nor is there any blood money to be paid for doing such'. Well aware that his fatwa exhibits troubling, easily-identified theological, ethical and legal flaws, he does not elaborate and instructs his audience to close the door to that thought before discussion arises. Building on old terrorist cell doctrine, he calls for layers of isolation and increased secrecy in communities: 'Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict'. Due to numerous flaws in his globally-issued fatwa, al-Baghdadi avoided any space or chance for intellectual negotiation with religious authority whatsoever.

In September 19th 2014, a group of over one hundred and twenty Muslim scholars and leaders issued a collective online fatwa in an Open Letter to the leader of the Islamic State (ISIL), Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi⁵¹. In their letter, they sought to refute most of al-Baghdadi's misinterpretations and religious manipulations; certainly to denounce ISIL's religious methods and approaches, and their use of violence and terror to build the Islamic

⁵⁰ Robins, R., & Post, J. M. (1997). *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

⁵¹ www.lettertobaghdadi.com. Accessed April 2014. Up to June 11th 2015, this letter seems to have received the likes of 126,927 on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/LetterToBaghdadi/likes>).

state⁵². One interesting point made was the oversimplification or cherry-picking approach al-Baghdadi used in his *fatwa*

‘It is not permissible to constantly speak of simplifying matters, or to cherry-pick an extract from the Qur’an without understanding it within its full context. It is also not permissible to say: ‘Islamic is simple, and the Prophet [Muhammad] and his noble Companions were simple, why complicate Islam?’ This is precisely what Abu al-Baraa’ al-Hindi [ascribed to India] did in his online video in July 2014. In it he says: ‘Open the Quran and read the verses on jihad and everything will become clear... all the scholars tell me “this is a legal obligation (*fard*), or that isn’t a legal obligation, and this is not the time for jihad”... forget them all and read the Qur’an and you will know what jihad is.’⁵³

In spite of the rich content of their open letter, and the authority of many of its religious signatories, it has yet to check al-Baghdadi’s media impact, plan of recruitment and execution. Their Fatwa was translated into many languages, including French, which perhaps means it was accessible to Rouleau and his likes. Interestingly enough, among a total of one hundred and seventy five⁵⁴, only one Canadian Muslim authority by the name of Shaykh Faraz Rabbani⁵⁵ was mentioned. Jamal Badawi of Halifax NS was also mentioned, but not as a Canadian religious figure, but rather as an Executive Director of the Fiqh Council of North America in the United States. Shaykh Rabbani himself, is not well known, and barely represents significant religious authority in his own local Muslim Community of Toronto, let alone all of Canada. He only returned to Canada in 2007. In fact, his name is somewhat controversial; especially in relation to his public statement made on Sufism and seeking others’ support (*istighatha*)⁵⁶. The point here being that established local Canadian Muslim religious authorities would have been more engaging to people like Rouleau. As their Fatwa was targeting al-Baghdadi, and by proxy his global audience, it remains to be said that the real target of this collective scholarly fatwa were Muslim audiences. Having said that, Canadian Muslim religious authorities could have initiated an interactive space of religious negotiation tailored to many segments of the Muslim community including converts like Rouleau. Intensifying and diversifying the counter-religious discourse, and incorporating in it local ingredients via Canadian media outlets could have possibly reduced the effects of the global terror fatwa to say the least. In a way the global open letter of many Muslim scholars remained to larger extend local and unheard of by many members of Muslim communities, including new Muslims.

As noted previously⁵⁷, although Rouleau’s interest in Jihad began in April/ May 2014⁵⁸, he was likely motivated by the fatwa of al-Baghdadi which further deepened his decision and may have even dictated the very plan he

⁵² The letter forbids Muslims to kill innocent people, kill emissaries, ambassadors, diplomats, journalists and aid workers. According to the Fatwa, Jihad in Islam is defensive. The letter also forbids declaring people as non-Muslim unless he (or she) openly declares disbelief, or harm or mistreat ‘People of the Scripture’ such as the Yazidis. The letter also warns from revival of slavery because Islam already abolished it; or force people to convert; women their rights; deny children their rights; enact legal punishments (*hudud*) without following the correct procedures that ensure justice and mercy; torture people; disfigure the dead; destroy the graves and shrines of Prophets and Companions; declare a caliphate without consensus from all Muslims.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 4

⁵⁴ As of March, 17th 2014.

⁵⁵ Faraz Rabbani obtained a Bachelors in Economics & Commerce from the University of Toronto in 1997. Subsequently, he spent ten years studying and teaching Islamic sciences in Damascus, Amman and Karachi under leading Islamic scholars including Shaykh Adib Kallas, Shaykh Hassan al-Hindi, Shaykh Muhammad Jumuah, Shaykh Akram Abd al-Wahhab, Shaykh Nuh Keller, and Mufti Mahmud Ashraf Usmani. He currently lives and teaches in Toronto, Canada, with his wife and three children. See his Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/shaykhfarazrabbani/info?tab=page_info/. After graduating from the University of Toronto in 1997, he and his wife (Ustadha Shireen Ahmed) travelled to Damascus and then to Amman, where he studied with leading Islamic scholars, including Shaykh Adib Kallas, Shaykh Hassaan al-Hindi, Shaykh Muhammad Jumuah, Shaykh Akram Abd al-Wahhab, and Shaykh Nuh Keller. In 2001, Shaykh Faraz began answering questions for his family and friends online; this grew into the Hanafi Fiqh list at Yahoo Groups. On the advice of his teachers, the Sunni Path web site was created, which featured both a question/answer service and online Islamic courses. After ten years overseas, Shaykh Faraz returned to Canada in the Summer of 2007. In May 2008 he founded ‘*Seekers Guidance*’ to deal with the urgent need to spread Islamic knowledge—both online and on the ground—in a reliable, relevant, inspiring, and accessible manner. See www.almuftari.wordpress.com/2014/04/16/ashari-scam-faraz-farid-rabbani-and-muhammad-ibn-adam-al-kawthari. Accessed April 2014.

⁵⁶ Sufi Mushrik Shaykh Faraz Rabbani busted for promoting shirk and lying. www.islamic-life.com/forums/deviants-heretics/sufi-mushrik-shaykh-faraz-rabbani-busted-promoting-shirk-lying-2204.

⁵⁷ Allan Woods. (2014). Martin Rouleau ‘died like he wanted to’. Thestar.com, www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/10/20/martin_rouleau_died_like_he_wanted_to.html. November 2014.

⁵⁸ Amarnath Amarasingam, a post-doctoral fellow at Dalhousie University’s Resilience Research Centre, said the following: “He didn’t start using “the language of jihad” until April or May. René, Bruemmer. (2014). (From typical teen to jihadist: How Martin Couture-

set to execute. Given that his interest to travel abroad and migrate to the Islamic State of ISIL failed, he then sought to free himself from growing guilt, and finally resorted to local home-grown jihad. His options were limited yet possible as per the instruction of his new Caliph: ‘*shooting with a gun, smashing the head, slaughtering with a knife*⁵⁹, *running over with a car, pushing the person from up high, choking the person or poisoning*’. Rouleau must have thought of the simplest methods to cause damage, which led him to a hit and run of innocent military personnel. He of course chose not to commit suicide leading to his ‘martyrdom’. He likely wanted to live, and be known as the *hero Ahmad al-Canadi*, fulfilling the emotional need that played a part in identifying with ISIL in the first place. As stated: “He became an extremist. He wanted to go fight jihad but they wouldn’t let him do it. The caliphate called all the Muslims on earth to fight. He listened to what they had to say and he did his part here.”⁶⁰

Conclusion

While Rouleau’s self-radicalization was a dynamic process, the feelings it espoused are by no means strange or even new. Powerlessness, anger, disillusion, and loneliness are harmless enough on their own, and individual responses to them are often coped with through family, spiritual leaders and friends. In his case, Rouleau either did not find support mechanisms available, approachable or likeable; and in light of the turbulence in his life as a result of his conversion and the changes associated with major lifestyle change, the lack of support options may have in truth hastened the radicalization process. One can only wonder if Rouleau would have succumbed to such an ideology of violent extremism had the basic measures of subtle supervision, tolerant guidance, and effective community support been in place. His actions and the question of possible intervention are made all the more strange considering the virulent strain of violence he adopted that is so at odds with the Canadian way of life.

Other issues worthy of note is the potential for a massively constructive role played by the security community in building confidence, capacity proactive engagement and immunity against radical elements and ideology. The need for specialist education and intelligent oversight and guidance of security practitioners and experts cannot go understated. One can only wonder if Rouleau would have succumbed to such an ideology of violent extremism if the basic necessities and guidance were in place, beginning with effective Muslim institute convert management, uniform quality control of appointed Imams, toolkits of interaction, effective mechanisms to engage converts and individuals alike in what they have to offer their communities; part of a larger pluralistic tapestry and on guard for the freedoms and cultural mosaic that Canada stands for.

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⁵⁹ A knife was found in his car.

⁶⁰ Allan Woods. (2014). *Martin Rouleau died like he wanted to*. www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/10/20/martin_rouleau_died_like_he_wanted_to.html. Accessed on November 2014.

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