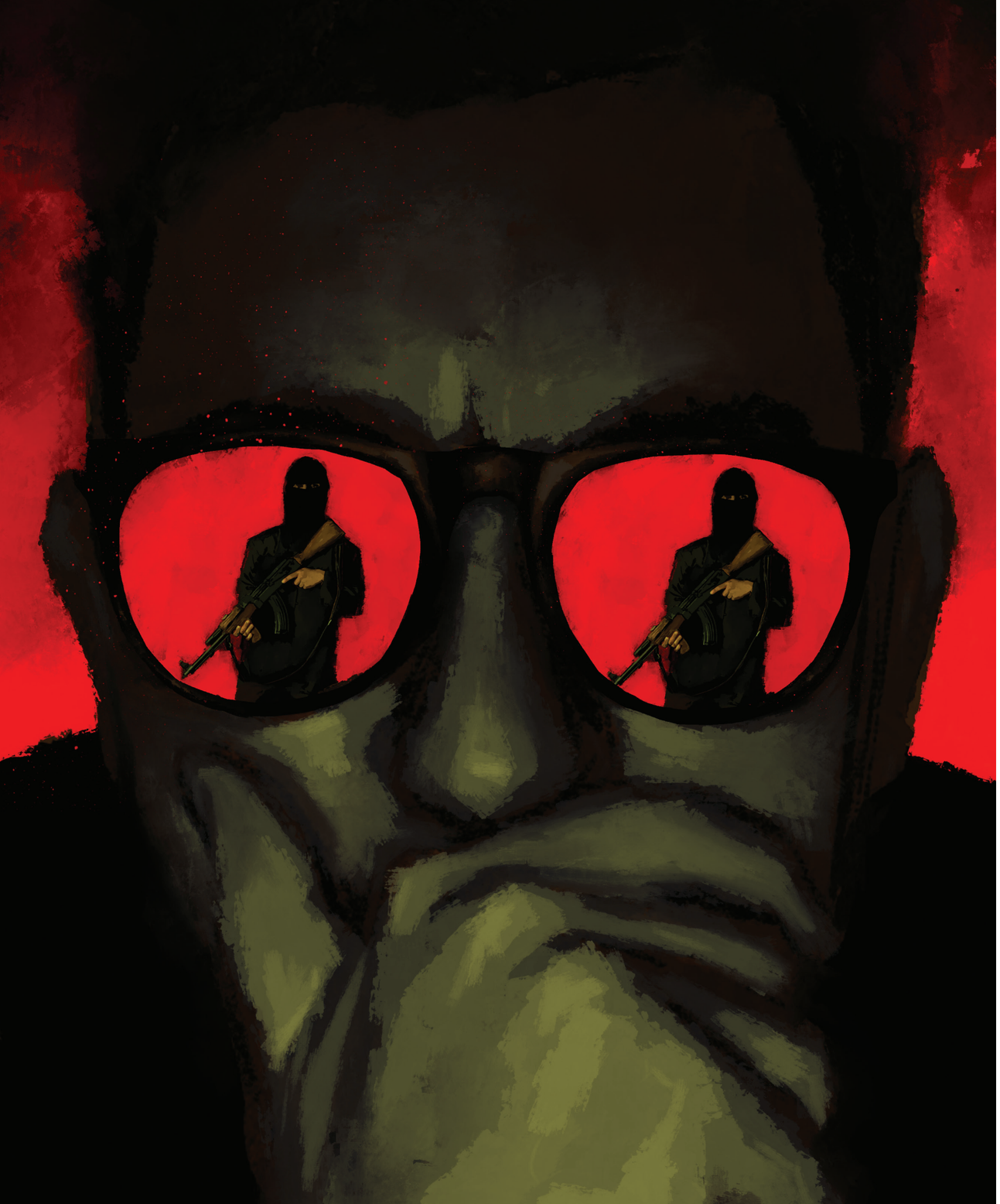

WINNING HEARTS

Illustration by Clay Rodery

Academics look at ways to stop Canadians from becoming radicalized

by Mark Cardwell

MINDS

> "They are all tied to the embracing of a world view and some transformative event that may or may not lead to violence. They are different pieces of the same puzzle."

For Canadian scholar Lorne Dawson, it isn't the massacre at the Bataclan theatre in Paris, the slaughter at Pulse nightclub in Orlando or the murderous truck attacks in Nice and Berlin that best illustrates the dangers and difficulties of dealing with radicalized extremists. Rather, it is a failed attack in May 2015 in Garland, Texas, when two U.S.-born men attempted to storm a conference where cartoon images of the prophet Muhammad were being exhibited.

One of the perpetrators, Nadir Hamid Soofi, had a Pakistani father, while the other, Elton Simpson, was an African-American man who had recently converted to Islam and become radicalized. The two died in a hail of bullets from a SWAT team before they could kill anyone.

Dr. Dawson, a professor of sociology, legal studies and religious studies at the University of Waterloo, is a pioneer in the study of homegrown terrorism. He had been following Mr. Simpson on Twitter and, like others, received Mr. Simpson's tweet alerting followers that he was leaving to commit the attack and pledging allegiance to the terrorist group ISIS.

What struck Dr. Dawson most was the outpouring of grief for Mr. Simpson from his followers on social media after the failed attack. "People were remembering what a great guy he was," says Dr. Dawson. "It was like a high school football team paying homage to its quarterback who'd been killed in a car crash. It had a very personal, supportive and caring tone; it wasn't religious rhetoric." For Dr. Dawson, these online eulogies speak volumes about the highly social nature of radicalized networks and the daunting challenges that authorities face in trying to curb and contain them.

"They can't be suppressed," he says. "Yes, these people are talking about jihad and violence. But they are also talking about their cats and dogs and kids. They are like neighbours who are massively engaged in this internet community that provides them with identity and meaning in their lives."

Dr. Dawson is one of the small but growing number of academics in Canada who are looking at how to prevent radicalization and violent extremism at home and abroad. Connected through a handful of academic networks and government-sponsored security groups and programs, they are an eclectic array of experts from a variety of disciplines at a small number of Canadian universities.

Their work forms the pieces in a global puzzle that is slowly being assembled to provide a better understanding of the inner workings of radicalized extremist groups and how they're formed. These groups include religiously motivated Muslim jihadists, but also those who adhere to other extremist ideologies which the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) says pose "serious threats" to our national security.

"The threat is diverse and dynamic and may not look the same each year," says Jez Littlewood, an assistant professor at Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, where he teaches courses on intelligence, terrorism, and chemical and biological weapons. Dr. Littlewood is currently working on a project that deals with terrorist financing through money laundering, illicit trafficking and extortion. One of three assistant professors at the school doing radicalization and counter-terrorism-related research, Dr. Littlewood is also the associate director, security, of the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society, or TSAS.

Co-founded in 2012 by Dr. Dawson, who is its director, and Daniel Hiebert, a University of British Columbia geography professor and policy expert in immigration and integration, TSAS is funded through a partnership grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and a contribution agreement with Public Safety Canada. Its goal is to foster collaboration between the roughly 200 Canadian and international academics who are conducting research aimed at understanding the complex relationship between cultural diversity, human rights and national security policy.

According to Dr. Littlewood, the current security challenge for many Western nations is trying to identify and track, and in some cases intercept, self-radicalized extremists eager to go abroad or who are already abroad and may return home. "We're looking at the full spectrum of counter-terrorism and terrorist prevention strategies, from planning and procurement to recruiting and funding," he says.

In recent years, much of the funding for research carried out by members of TSAS had come from the Kanishka Project. Created by the former Conservative government in 2011 to help Canadian researchers find ways to understand and counter terrorism, the five-year, $10-million program expired in early 2016.

Last August, Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale told reporters he would revive the Kanishka Project under a new name and with a new focus on de-radicalization. That shift is partly in response to what some see as the eventual military destruction of the Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and the expected return of foreign ISIS fighters to their homes in Western countries, including Canada. However, the program had not been officially announced at the time this article was written.

Minister Goodale released a CSIS report last August that identified the Islamic State as the main terrorist threat to Canada. The CSIS report estimated that 180 people from Canada, including nearly 40 women, many of them with children, were overseas with foreign terrorist groups. Another 60 are thought to have already returned.

That number pales in comparison to the thousands of foreign fighters who have, or are expected to, return home to their European countries in the coming years, according to security experts. "It's not that Canada doesn't have a threat, it's just that the threat here is far less," says Dr. Dawson, who spent his early academic career studying how charismatic cult leaders like Jim Jones were able to incite their followers to commit mass murder or suicide.

Radicalized extremist groups in Canada tend to be religious in nature, small in size, and are infiltrated and broken up in the early stages, says Dr. Dawson. "MI-5 told the British Parliament it had intervened in 65 plots between 2005 and 2015," he says. "That's 10 times as many as here. Still, it's always dangerous when individuals are thinking about and planning to do something bad."

For Dr. Dawson, the rise of ISIS in general, and the creation of the Islamic State caliphate in June 2014 in particular, prompted many radicalized individuals to act, whether by going to the Middle East to join the ranks of ISIS or by carrying out lone-wolf attacks on its behalf in their home countries. They were spurred on by what Dr. Dawson calls the masterful propaganda by the caliphate's media and communications arm. According to a 2015 report by the London-based think tank Quilliam, ISIS was releasing, on average, 38 new items *per day* – including videos, full-length documentaries, photo essays and audio clips – through social media.

Even if the caliphate fails, the movement will continue, says Dr. Dawson. "Hundreds of sleeper operations are estimated to be in Europe, and the entire phenomenon of jihadism has become a worldwide social movement that is being kept alive through the internet."

What researchers need now is primary, first-hand data, and "we can only get that by talking to the terrorists," says Dr. Dawson. For the past 18 months, he and Amarnath Amarasingam, a postdoctoral fellow at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., have been conducting a study based at the University of Waterloo of Western foreign fighters. Dr. Dawson didn't interview the self-radicalized Canadian Aaron Driver, 24, as part of that research, but he and Dr. Amarasingam did interview Mr. Driver as part of court proceedings held in February 2016. Authorities wanted a peace bond placed on Mr. Driver, restricting his activities. That interview was submitted as expert testimony.

Months later, on August 10, Mr. Driver was killed in a confrontation with police in Strathroy, Ontario, while apparently trying to detonate a suicide bomb. Like Mr. Simpson in the Texas attack, Mr. Driver was deeply immersed in his online network of fellow jihadists, says Dr. Dawson. The peace bond that was placed on him, prohibiting him from contacting the network, failed to stop him and likely even radicalized him further. "Life became meaningless for him," says Dr. Dawson. "He was like a drug addict. He would have needed to be put in rehab to help him change, help him shape a new and better life for himself."

Dr. Dawson points to the effectiveness of a prevention program out of the U.K. called Channel, which provides support to individuals who are at risk of being drawn into terrorism. "The program is designed to match people with someone they think is credible – a religious person or a social worker or whoever – to let them air their views," says Dr. Dawson. "It seems to be the single best strategy to counter terrorism and radicalization. The trick though is to catch people early."

Similar efforts are being tried here in Canada through local, grassroots groups. But, "it requires training, and it can be tricky to find a proper balance," says Dr. Dawson. "You don't want to mistake a religious act like growing a beard as being a worrisome development. But, if that person starts speaking in radical terms, that's a problem."

David Hofmann, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of New Brunswick, is a recent doctoral graduate who studied under Dr. Dawson. Dr. Hofmann's current research focus is the Freemen-on-the-Land or Sovereign citizen movement. These loose groups of extremist individuals and social outliers, he says, share the belief that they are not bound by the laws that govern society unless they freely grant their consent to those laws.

Like other radicals, these groups reject government authority, which makes them a potential threat to public safety and security, says Dr. Hofmann. "They are all tied to the embracing of a world view and some transformative event that may or may not lead to violence. They are different pieces of the same puzzle."

SÉDUIRE LES CŒURS ET LES ESPRITS

Des universitaires cherchent comment prévenir la radicalisation des Canadiens

par Mark Cardwell

For Aurélie Campana, a political science professor at Université Laval, a major challenge to preventing violent acts is figuring out how to identify what triggers them. It's difficult "to establish a trajectory," says Dr. Campana, who holds the Canada Research Chair on Conflicts and Terrorism at U Laval and is also an associate director at TSAS.

Interviews conducted in European prisons with returning ISIS fighters are offering some clues about their experiences abroad and their state of mind when they return home. Dr. Campana says it's becoming clear that the mechanisms of recruitment and radicalization are most similar to those used by street gangs, as well as by racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and by extremist political movements like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia, also known as FARC.

"Many are young people, often between the ages of 16 and 22, in search of identity or adventure, a sense of belonging and even altruism," says Dr. Campana. "It's rare that someone radicalizes alone in their basement. They need affirmation, whether on the street, from friends on Twitter or from some virtual discussion group."

She adds that, once recruits adhere to and espouse the group's ideology, it can put them in direct conflict with family members and friends, as well as with school or the authorities. "That can accelerate the process of radicalization."

SAMI AOUN, a political scientist and Middle East specialist at Université de Sherbrooke, says radicalization represents an existential challenge for liberal democracies. "Radical speech is welcome in Western democracies – just think of Ghandi or [Nelson] Mandela or Mother Theresa," he says. "Democracies also tolerate radical ideas that criticize the fundamentals of our society."

The challenge, he says, is deciding where free speech ends and the call to violence begins. "It's a test for the tolerance of democracies. Nationalist and religious groups are always testing the law's boundaries."

Authorities, he says, need to be careful not to over-dramatize the threat by cracking down too harshly on groups, nor to trivialize the potential for extremist violence by comparing the number of terrorist victims with, say, the number of deaths on Canada's roads each year.

Dr. Aoun also serves as director of the Observatoire sur la radicalisation et l'extrémisme violent, a Montreal-based group of French-language academics. The group was strengthened by the addition of a new international research chair on radicalization that was announced by the Quebec government during a Quebec-UNESCO conference in Quebec City in late October. The conference, entitled "Internet and the Radicalization of Youth: Preventing, Acting and Living Together," drew hundreds of experts on the subject from around the world.

According to Dr. Aoun, radicalization is like a disease that can "shake the pillars" of an open, tolerant society that is based on trust. "A culture of hate and fear, which is at the very heart of radicalization and extremist violence, advocates the end of trust and tolerance."

Dr. Aoun says he believes that Canada has three cultural and political attributes that help to protect it against the propagation of radicalization and extremist violence: a well-entrenched secularism that is neither ideological nor dogmatic; the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which states a belief in God but embraces freedom of conscience; and alternating political power, which allows for the acceptance of new norms – everything from homosexuality to legalized marijuana. "We have a good equilibrium," he says. UA

Résumé de l'article « Winning hearts and minds » débutant en page 22.

POUR LE CHERCHEUR CANADIEN Lorne Dawson, la meilleure illustration des dangers et difficultés que posent les extrémistes radicalisés n'est ni le massacre du Bataclan, à Paris, ni la tuerie du Pulse, à Orlando. C'est plutôt l'attaque ratée, en mai 2015 à Garland, au Texas, lors de laquelle deux hommes natifs des États-Unis avaient tenté d'investir une conférence où étaient exposées des caricatures de Mahomet.

L'un des auteurs de l'attaque, Nadir Hamid Soofi, avait un père pakistanais; l'autre, Elton Simpson, était un Afro-américain, radicalisé depuis peu. Simpson avait prêté allégeance à Daech avant de se rendre sur les lieux. Les deux hommes ont été abattus par une équipe d'intervention d'urgence avant de pouvoir tuer quiconque.

Professeur de sociologie, d'études juridiques et d'études religieuses à l'Université de Waterloo, M. Dawson a surtout été frappé par le chagrin exprimé par ceux qui avaient jusqu'alors suivi Simpson sur les réseaux sociaux. « On aurait dit les membres d'une équipe de football du secondaire rendant hommage à leur quart-arrière tué dans un accident de voiture. Leurs messages de soutien avaient un ton très personnel et bienveillant, dénué de rhétorique religieuse. »

Pionnier de l'étude du terrorisme intérieur, M. Dawson fait partie du nombre croissant d'universitaires canadiens qui se penchent sur les moyens de prévenir la radicalisation et l'extrémisme violent, au pays comme à l'étranger. Issus de quelques universités canadiennes et de disciplines très diverses, ces spécialistes échangent dans le cadre de groupes et de programmes axés sur la sécurité et financés par les gouvernements, ainsi que de quelques réseaux universitaires.

Le TSAS (Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society) est l'un de ces réseaux. Il a été conjointement mis sur pied en 2012 par son directeur, M. Dawson, et par Daniel Hiebert, professeur de géographie à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique et spécialiste des politiques publiques en matière d'immigration et d'intégration. Grâce à une subvention de partenariat du Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines et d'un accord de contribution avec Sécurité publique Canada, le TSAS vise à renforcer la collaboration entre les quelque 200 universitaires canadiens et étrangers qui étudient les liens complexes entre diversité culturelle, droits de la personne et politiques de sécurité nationale.

Pour Aurélie Campana, directrice adjointe du TSAS et titulaire de la Chaire de recherche du Canada sur les conflits et le terrorisme à l'Université Laval, l'un des grands défis de la prévention des actes violents consiste à déterminer ce qui les déclenche. « Il est rare que quelqu'un se radicalise seul dans son sous-sol », précise-t-elle.

« Un grand nombre de recrues sont jeunes. Souvent âgées de 16 à 22 ans, elles sont en quête d'identité ou d'aventure, d'un sentiment d'appartenance et même d'altruisme. » Dès qu'une recrue épouse l'idéologie d'un groupe, il y a risque de conflit direct entre elle et les membres de sa famille, ses amis et les autorités, ce qui peut accélérer la radicalisation.

Depuis quelques années, le financement des recherches du TSAS provenait majoritairement du programme Kanishka, créé en 2011 par le gouvernement fédéral conservateur et doté d'une enveloppe de 10 millions de dollars. Ce programme quinquennal visait à aider les chercheurs canadiens à trouver des moyens de comprendre et de contrer le terrorisme, mais il a pris fin au début de 2016. En août dernier, le ministre de la Sécurité publique, Ralph Goodale, a annoncé à la presse son intention de le relancer sous un nouveau nom, mais la nouvelle version du programme, axée sur la déradicalisation, n'a toujours pas vu le jour.

Selon Sami Aoun, politicologue et spécialiste du Moyen-Orient à l'Université de Sherbrooke, la radicalisation menace l'existence des démocraties libérales. À l'heure où les démocraties occidentales tolèrent les discours radicaux, le défi consiste à déterminer ce qui relève de la liberté d'expression, et ce qui tient de l'appel à la violence.

« La tolérance des démocraties est mise à l'épreuve. Les groupes nationalistes et religieux testent sans cesse les limites imposées par la loi », précise M. Aoun, qui est également directeur de l'Observatoire sur la radicalisation et l'extrémisme violent. Formé de chercheurs francophones, ce groupe montréalais s'est vu renforcé par la création d'une nouvelle chaire de recherche internationale sur la radicalisation, annoncée l'année dernière par le gouvernement québécois lors d'une conférence conjointe avec l'UNESCO.

M. Aoun compare la radicalisation à une maladie susceptible « d'ébranler les piliers » de toute société ouverte et tolérante basée sur la confiance. Le Canada possède toutefois d'après lui trois atouts culturels et politiques qui aident à le protéger de la propagation de la radicalisation et de l'extrémisme violent : une laïcité bien ancrée, ni idéologique ni dogmatique; une Charte des droits et libertés qui affirme la suprématie de Dieu, mais protège la liberté de conscience; et une alternance sur le plan politique, qui permet une évolution sur tous les plans (acceptation de l'homosexualité, légalisation de la marijuana, etc.). « C'est là un bon équilibre », conclut M. Aoun. AU