

Implementing Montreal's Centre for the prevention of radicalization leading to violence: Insights from the 2015 TSAS Summer Academy

By Maxime Bérubé, Université de Montréal

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The second edition of TSAS Summer Academy was held at the University of British Columbia from July 19th to 24th, 2015. As a graduate student and TSAS junior affiliate, I had the opportunity to spend a week discussing issues related to terrorism, security and society with leading experts in Canada. Thanks to the speakers who have contributed throughout this week, I learned a lot on how the Canadian government and Canadian security agencies manage to counter violent extremism and put into place counter-terrorism measures. Knowledge mobilization and discussions on these topics matter because radicalization and violent extremism are two of the main current concerns of many countries in the world, including Canada.

Terrorist threats come from an ideological extremism legitimizing or leading to violence in the name of a particular cause. This violent extremism can take root in various motivations, often religious, political or issued from other specific ideologies. The process by which an individual, or a group, gets engaged in this kind of extremism is highly complex. To address this threat, some well-established organizations, such as police agencies, are setting up new programs. Moreover, new institutions are created to develop alternate and complementary approaches that can't be supported by existing organizations. In the absence of a formal structure to handle radicalization in a purely preventive way, the City of Montreal, in partnership with the Government of Quebec, decided to establish the *Centre for the prevention of radicalization leading to violence* (CPRLV). The creation of this Centre was one of the different initiatives that were presented during the 2015 Summer Academy. Hence, this paper aims to introduce the Centre and briefly discuss its main prospective challenges.

The Montreal approach to the prevention of radicalization

Briefly, the Montreal-based approach, which is the first of its kind in North America, aims to "stop the spreading of extremism, identify individuals that are in a process of radicalization toward violence and contribute to their disengagement". It is based on the assumption that if families, relatives and various stakeholders in the community have a better understanding of the warning signs of radicalization leading to violence, they would be better equipped to detect, intervene and disrupt the radicalization process. The Centre is therefore aimed at being a reference and expertise hub in this field. Its main distinction from other similar initiatives in Canada is that it is a non-profit independent organization not led by law enforcement. The latter feature distinguishes the Centre from the ReDirect program of the Calgary Police Service, for instance. Staff at the Centre are mainly psychologists, social workers, community workers, youth educators, communication advisors and researchers. The City of Montreal has been, for several years now, orienting its police force toward a community policing model and opting for a "Living Together" philosophy. The "Living Together" is another Montreal-based initiative, recently implemented by the mayor of Montreal, that aims to maintain links with the mayors of other cities across the world facing similar challenges, considering that "cities are the best place to start dealing with these issues, and only by working together can we encourage best practices,

both in terms of ‘openness’ i.e. various social inclusion measures, and in terms of ‘vigilance, or prevention and security’¹. Accordingly, the Center’s program is based on public safety concerns, and is designed to act on a perspective of pro-active prevention. It will thus follow the aim of listening to and supporting concerned individuals, as well as their families and friends, in minimizing vulnerability factors and ensuring the presence of protective factors.

CPRLV

The 5 main mandates



CPRLV

3 axes for action

Information and notification

- Set up an information platform;
- Report and inform on disturbing situations;
- Support and direct toward proper resources.

Prevention

- Communicate and educate;
- Mobilize resources and expertise;
- Exchange best practices and experiences.

Psychological intervention

- Professional approach and psychological intervention;
- Facilitate social and professional reintegration;
- Promote research.

The development of the Montreal’s approach is based on an exhaustive review of national and international de-radicalization and disengagement programs and initiatives around the world. This review has allowed the City of Montreal to set up its own program based on 5 main mandates that will be carried out through 3 axes for action: information, prevention and

intervention. The first axe of information includes a 24/7 hotline to receive calls from worried citizens. The second axe of prevention consists in mobilizing, exchanging and educating on best practices and developed expertise. The third axe of intervention involves psychological intervention, social and professional reintegration and promoting research on radicalization, de-radicalization and disengagement. Besides, the 5 mandates are: (1) promoting preventive or “upstream” strategies that are intended to thwart indoctrination by ideologies leading to violence, (2) taking over individual cases of violent radicalization and support, (3) providing psychosocial support to the network of people involved in radicalization processes and to milieus (schools, communities, etc.) that might be facing radicalization issues, (4) ensuring social reintegration, and (5) promoting research and fostering the development of a knowledge and best practice regarding radicalization prevention and de-radicalization/disengagement programs.

They are aware that radicalization is a complex and multidimensional process, and they consider it as “the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change”². The crucial operational aspects of CPRLV management involve the ways in which the Centre takes charge of each case, and its information exchange protocol with law enforcement agencies and institutional partners (youth centers, schools, etc.). Thus, an evaluation process that allows to better situate and assess the risks posed by reported cases was developed. Each stage of the radicalization process provides a number of relevant warning signs, intervention techniques and recommendations. At a preventive level, early efforts are made upstream to reduce socio-political, socio-economic and socio-emotional factors that may affect the health of the community. Then, social interventions are engaged to strengthen protective factors, such as stable network, critical thinking skills, emotional well-being, dealing with ambivalence, capacity to argue, and so on. In cases where social prevention is not sufficient to maintain a pro-social commitment and a willingness to “Live Together”, various types of psychosocial interventions are foreseen in terms of both de-radicalization and disengagement. Lastly, for cases presenting more serious or imminent risks, or when a criminal act has been committed, or is about to be committed, an information exchange protocol is planned for law enforcement. In addition to several other situations, as will be discussed below, this evaluation process is a particularly major challenge for the Centre.

The “smart power” strategy: a major challenge for the Center

Achieving the Centre’s objectives cannot be done without difficulties, and some significant challenges can already be anticipated. One of the most important will be to balance the benefits of soft and hard powers. As a strategy of smart power³ would suggest, the cases should be treated in a way that law enforcement intervention is requested only when necessary. Indeed, the Centre seeks to develop a relationship of trust with the community, especially to reinforce its legitimacy and encourage people to use the hotline. If too many calls for assistance turn into prosecutions, the Centre will not be able to build that trust.

In return, even if the Centre advocates a preventive approach and tries to avoid as much as possible prosecutions of the people it looks to rehabilitate, good relationships must also be maintained with law enforcement. On the one hand, the Center wishes to maintain an institutional independence and preserve the confidentiality of the cases brought to their attention, but on the other hand, they definitely do not want to obstruct ongoing criminal investigations. To do so, some form of bilateral cooperation, such as with the Quebec’s Counter-Terrorism Police Structure Management, must be done on a regular basis, so that the Centre can know which of its

cases are under criminal investigation. Furthermore, they must maintain relationships with law enforcement agencies, because the help they can get from them in terms of intelligence is an important asset, especially to assess the risk that a person of interest may pose. Therefore, even if the Center wants to limit its links with law enforcement agencies, both may benefit from each other, and the latter would also gain by making its resources available when needed by the Center.

In conclusion, I believe that the institutional independence of the Centre and a strict bidirectional relationship protocol with law enforcement is essential to its legitimacy. The creation of Montreal's Centre for the prevention of radicalization leading to violence may hold the potential to prevent and counter violent extremism in the Province of Quebec. While the challenges are great, the benefits can be even greater!

Opinions expressed in this article belong to the author and do not represent the Centre, or any organization or individual related to it.

*The 2015 Summer Academy was held under the Chatham House Rule, where participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed - See more at:
<https://www.chathamhouse.org/about/chatham-house-rule#sthash.S3FSLTep.dpuf>*

¹ Metropolis (2015). "Living Together/ Vivre Ensemble" summit in Montréal, on June 10 and 11, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.metropolis.org/news/2015/04/15/1742>

² Allen, C. E. (2007). Threat of Islamic Radicalization to the Homeland. Written testimony of U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Retrieved from <http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/testimony/270.pdf>

³ Armitage, R. L., & Nye, J. S. (2007). *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A smarter, more secure America*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved from http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/071106_csissmartpowerreport.pdf