

YOUTH ISLAMIST RADICALIZATION:

THE PUSH FACTORS AND STRATEGIES TO COMBAT IT

"We need a combination of both tough and soft responses to deal with the security threats posed by the radicals"

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Despite growing consensus on the drivers of violent extremism, there is still little understanding of how and why those drivers push and pull certain individuals down the path of radicalization. What is attracting them? What are the best strategies to combat extremism and terrorism, taking into account the case of those returning from Syria and Iraq?

Terrorist groups use a pattern of violence in order to undermine governments' authority and cause fear among the public. They cause not only deaths and injuries, but also thwart hope for democracy and development, because terrorism destroys institutions and infrastructure, which is detrimental to long-term peace and stability. For example, from 2011 to 2015 there were approximately 62,000 terrorist incidents worldwide, of those 23,000 occurred in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and Africa, of which about 3,000 or 13% were committed by the "Islamic State" (IS). This pattern of violence is likely to continue despite the defeat of IS on the ground, i.e., in Iraq and soon in Syria.

Normally, radicalism and terrorism thrive in marginalized districts and neighborhoods, where development is non-existent, and communities are left to their own devices, as well as in prisons where the government often has little influence. If not captured – as in the latest attacks on Manchester and London – even a handful of terrorists could cause destruction and tremendous mayhem to the flimsy economies and stability of countries in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

It seems to be the case that there are many facets of radicalized young people, and several push factors that attract them to adopt an extremist cause. Consequently, there is no one solution that will eradicate this social evil. Nonetheless, it is necessary to investigate causes of frustration and wrath within the Muslim communities. It is no accident that the rise of radicalism among youth has taken place in countries that were failing to meet the basic needs of their populations, according to reports by the World Bank and the UN. Poor or failed governance, lack of economic development, dictatorship and segregation by sect, race and tribe have all led, over the last decade, to the growth of extremism.

Furthermore, these factors have commonly contributed to substantial youth unemployment or underemployment, and deplorable housing conditions, and a rapid worsening of the quality of education, medical care, and other major services.

There are a few standard causes that motivate youth radicalization, ranging from the cultural aspect (a sense of belonging to a “noble cause”), to the social-economic aspects (jihadis are promised good salaries, marriage to beautiful women), to psychological factors like sensation-seeking, risk-taking traits, or the aspiration to become a hero, and religious factors like contributing to the building of the so-called Islamic Caliphate. All these various push factors reverberate with youth sentiments, and are adequate tactics of recruiting and radicalizing youth.

Dealing with radicalization of youth requires a community-based approach customized at the local levels with all parties – government, civil society, parents, schools and universities, local authorities, and religious leaders. Also, terrorist recruiters are successful because they take the time and effort to customize and personalize each recruitment to the individual target. Almost all recruited young jihadis constantly remark that the recruiters valued them and listened to them.



Many African, Middle Eastern, and European countries are struggling to deal with youth radicalization and violent extremism. However, what is missing is a comprehensive global approach, as well as cooperation, information, and expertise sharing between governments. Despite the obvious security threats that terrorists pose, it is still the exception to see cooperation endeavors, sharing of resources and intelligence to create a new synergy to deal with the challenges.

Similarly, there is much more blame to put on those states that support IS and extremism in proxy conflicts. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have recently cut diplomatic relations with Qatar, which allegedly hosts and supports terrorist groups in order to destabilize the region. Notably, Saudi Arabia has often been accused of doing the same.

Several methods can be used to deal effectively with radicalized youth, ranging from continuous parental supervision and proximity since an early age, to investing time, energy and money to create an optimistic environment and send a message of hope to targeted youth and communities. Governments should continue building relations with the local population, gaining their trust, and from that relationship deriving intelligence. By winning their trust, the population will support the government, provide information and help them defeat extremism and terrorism.

Notwithstanding all the obstacles, there are sensibly successful programs at the national and international levels. For instance, Morocco's training of certified Imams throughout North Africa and the Sahel, as well as for European mosques has proven effective; also some amnesty laws, as well as new anti-terrorist laws in Europe. Other national programs that have been successful and are worth considering are: fostering participative citizenship such as encouraging local

development; developing career plans; micro-projects for small and medium size businesses; health care assistance; cultural initiatives for the arts and music; and using the media, particularly social media, to promote social cohesion.

Although all these initiatives are badly needed, the key is political will, commitment, and funding support to youth de-radicalization and to counter-terrorism efforts. Many African and Middle Eastern countries already have limited to extensive agreements with south European partners – mostly focused on sharing information (Morocco–Spain and Libya–Italy). Much more could be done to create a synergy of resources and expertise sharing while stepping up cooperation.

We need a combination of both tough and soft responses to deal with the security threats posed by the radicals, such as anti-terrorism laws, monitoring returnees, curfews, imprisonment coupled with reintegration and reeducation, community participation, psychological support, job training, state controlled education of Imams, etc.

Finally, terrorist content should be removed from the Internet, and no spaces should be allowed for terrorists and extremists online. Internet giants like Facebook and Google should get tougher on online extremism and act more promptly in taking down extremist material.