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THE LEARNING PLATFORM ON HUMAN MOBILITY'S EXPERT

MEETING ON:

Understanding the Underlying Philosophies and Psychological Causes of Extremism

21-22 October 2013
Antwerp, Belgium

SUMMARY

Drawing from the discussions that took place in Antwerp, Belgium on 21-22 October 2013 at the Expert Meeting on “Understanding the Underlying Philosophies and Psychological Causes of Extremism,” the following points emerged as areas of further reflection.

The challenges facing municipalities with respect to radicalization is rooted in the issue of how individuals are perceived within society – social cohesion and not securitization is the main vehicle through which the issue of radicalization of youth must be addressed, including for those embracing Islam.

Local authorities expressed a need for action – one which must become part of the national consciousness, and for which sustainable solutions must be sought.

Cities and small municipalities in particular need the support of local, regional, federal and international actors. It was considered that at the moment, there is insufficient unity within initiatives taken. There is a need for more: cooperation, coordination, exchange of practice in which concrete needs are identified and addressed, with policies which support front-line workers in executing their responsibilities.

Since the first reporting on Europeans going to fight in Syria, the media, generally speaking, has and continues to be a negative distraction, leading to short-term and possibly misguided policy actions.

Constructive attention must be drawn on those who are returning from Syria; their reintegration will be a difficult and distinct process from better efforts at integration within Belgian and European societies as a whole.

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Given the number of definitions and interchangeable use of concepts with significantly different ensuing policy-prescriptions, the terms of radicalization and violent extremism should be more clearly delineated with the understanding that radicalization in and of itself - “a process in which an individual’s convictions and willingness to seek deep and serious changes in society increase”¹ – may require targeted interventions by public officials but of a different nature than those suspected or convicted of violent acts.

Some clarity was provided on the main elements of radicalization: grievance, ideology, mobilization (recruitment), marginalization and lack of sense of belonging to the local context. Whether this leads to violent behavior – in other words, whether these combined “symptoms” lead an individual toward violent actions towards civilians - is a separate issue; with the vexing challenge of understanding how, when and under what conditions a person decides to act out violently.

Most of society is non-violent. This is true of all segments of society. The negative focus on Muslim communities as a whole in Europe, in Belgium, the Netherlands, and in the UK, three countries discussed, is highly regrettable from a human and humane perspective, but also regrettable as it detracts attention from other sources of violent extremism.

More time should be vested in understanding how and why diversity in Europe should, or indeed must, be embraced. Part of this active reflection will require a greater need to understand Muslim culture and its diverse perspectives. This exercise will depend on opening up to diversity and change, key to creating a welcoming society. The fundamentally closed views on diversity will have to change in Europe, and this holds true for small and larger towns. While actors and dynamics differ, this remains a global challenge, one rooted in people’s general resistance to change and other human sentiments.

Diversity must be built into everyday life: government, school curricula, media, etc. VRT was cited as a positive example in this regard. A central challenge is to have “Old Belgians” meet new ones. The “bridging challenge” was identified as one that must be addressed with creativity and examples that have worked elsewhere and which could be applied in the Flemish context.

In this meeting, a call for change in attitudes was strikingly perceived as most urgent when hearing about how diversity is (or more aptly: is not) addressed in the education sector. There is a need for a holistic approach in education; teachers should value students’ different backgrounds, as it is proven

¹ Tarik Fraihi, “(De-)Escalating radicalization: The debate within Muslim and immigrant communities” in Rik Coolsaet (ed.), *Jihadi terrorism and the radicalization challenge in Europe* (Hampshire: Ashgate; 2008).





that congruence between the family and the educational context provides the best results. This includes an open approach to students with different mother tongues.

In understanding that a Muslim adolescent is a European adolescent, a Belgian adolescent, s/he has the same rights to express, exhibit and indeed act out the discomforts of puberty and of young adult life. S/he, like his/her peers, needs to be understood and not ostracized. It was suggested that spaces of confidence can help young Muslims through this period – and that such spaces may alleviate in part current fragile and hostile societal conditions. A recurring issue here is the importance of family and social networks, which should not be underestimated.

More broadly, as Muslim communities mature in Europe, they are also more active in developing and communicating their social agenda; it was encouraged that city leaders actively engage with all ethnic communities. Inviting Muslim leaders – young and old – and not necessarily Imams, for breakfast discussions with the Mayor at City Hall, on a periodic basis, is one symbolic example of bridge-building that is used in a city like New York.

Local Authorities have the responsibility to know their communities and to provide a platform for inter-group communications. A key example of this type of integration is the local police force, which should be a reflection of society – including members of different minorities – to build a relationship of trust within all communities.

The use of the Internet has fundamentally changed in the last decade, not just as a bank of information but also as an active and convincing incitement and recruitment vehicle. Next to grievance and ideology, mobilization is an important part of the radicalization process. Due to its ubiquity and anonymity, the Internet lowers users' thresholds, giving them unlimited access to global sources of information, including inciting videos and graphics. Perhaps most importantly, the Internet provides a venue for experiencing community and gives users the chance to be linked into social networks. This gives rise to the question how solitary "lonely wolves" really are.

Furthermore, how to constrain the impact of the Internet is difficult to assess. While removing content and blocking providers can have limited impact (but, for example, is not possible in the United States for constitutional reasons), it was considered that in Belgium, it is essential and legally required to remove material that could possibly be insightful. We must also take note of the fact that although the internet is a powerful tool for radicalization, the same tools could be applied to counter radicalization.

More attention should also be given to the topic of mental health as a non-negligible trigger in some cases of violent extremism.

