

# COMMENTARY

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## **Integration is the Open Secret to Deradicalization**

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One of the most troubling developments resulting from the escalation of violent extremism in the Middle East is the rise in the number of Muslims from the West who are joining the ranks of jihadist groups, notably ISIS. Western governments are struggling to find out what motivates young Muslims to leave their sheltered lives—many are well-to-do and educated—only to join radical organizations that offer an elusive goal and the prospect of violent death.

It appears that the determining factor behind this phenomenon is the absence of integration, by choice or design, of young Muslims into the mainstream of their respective Western countries. For this reason, integration must be the engine that propels deradicalization, and of necessity it takes a whole range of socio-economic, religious, and political measures to mitigate the vulnerabilities in these areas that young Muslims experience.

The rise of violent extremism is only at the early stages, and if the West wants to stem the flow of volunteers to these ruthless groups, Western countries should make a concerted effort to engage and understand the nuances of their Muslim communities, especially the families from which these volunteers are coming.

Unlike assimilation, where an individual stands to lose his identity by absorption into the mainstream culture, integration involves a mutual recognition and respect of the other—a harmonization that includes difference rather than denies it.

Lewis Mumford put it best when he stated that: “Integration proceeds by... a deliberate heightening of every organic function; a release of impulses from circumstances that irrationally thwarted them; richer and more complex patterns of activity; an aesthetic heightening of anticipated realizations; a steady lengthening of the future; a faith in cosmic perspectives.”

The psychological dimension of violent extremism needs to be understood as there is no one single root cause or path that leads to the mental and emotional conditioning that transforms young Muslims from being ordinary peaceful individuals to violently radical.\

The threat emanating today from ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other Islamist groups is inspired by religious teachings, distorted under the guise of defending purist Sunni Islam, which ultimately aim to infect susceptible Muslim youths to whom religion provides an escape and a sense of belonging.

Violent extremists wage a war on Western cultural and religious precepts and wish to see their acts fused into the identity of their own Muslim community so they can be recognized as being representative of the larger community, especially by the media.

Many of the young men and women who live in Western countries feel increasingly marginalized economically, socially, and politically, and are particularly vulnerable as they are often in transitional stages in their lives, whether as immigrants, students in search of friends, job seekers, etc.

On the whole, they are in need of an outlet to vent their frustration, and consequently, they become easy prey for extremists seeking new recruits in mosques and online.

There is, however, a common denominator behind most of the causes that radicalize Muslim youth, which is the lack of integration into their new social milieu, caused by:

- Disinterest in being integrated, as many young Muslims are living in a bubble where they feel comfortable and secure and are not encouraged to step out beyond their immediate circle of peers and family. This is further compounded in situations where extremism runs deep in a particular family, or where they have certain gripes against the socio-political milieu in which they live;
- No deliberate effort by governments to integrate Muslim youth into general society, a condition further aggravated by entrenched prejudices in most West European societies, such as Britain and France. Citizens of foreign descent in these states are often identified and remain as ‘foreigners,’ regardless of how long they have been living in their adopted countries, even if they are second or third generation citizens;
- The growing pervasiveness of Islamophobia among Europeans, precipitated by the rise of violent extremists of all colorations and the seemingly endless bloodshed between

Muslim communities and against Westerners, which has produced a conscious and unconscious repudiation of anything related to Muslims in general;

- A deeper, growing sense of alienation, which is the antithesis to inclusiveness, leading young Muslims in particular to find ways to resist and defy rather than seek new opportunities to integrate and become loyal nationals of their adopted countries.

Interestingly enough, the number of young American Muslims joining violent extremist groups remains proportionately considerably less than the number of British and French Muslims joining ISIS.

This perhaps can be explained by the fact that the US is essentially a country of immigrants, and having foreign roots is part of American culture. Therefore, the incorporation of foreigners into the main social stream, with some exception, is left up to the individual and is generally constrained only by the person's qualifications and ambitions.

West European Muslims in particular seek to maintain their identity and can do so through integration, where their identity as a Muslim is not lost, rather than assimilation.

If West European countries are to subscribe to Mumford's notion of integration, they must develop a comprehensive strategy that would prevent young disenfranchised Muslims from being lured to join the ranks of violent extremists.

Before they can develop such a strategy, they must avoid generalizations (for example, that Islam is inherently violent), understand why young Muslims and converts are joining, and why many of them come back. Only then should governments take specific steps to ensure that those who joined and return are deradicalized and become useful citizens who can dissuade others from following their path.

There are no quick fixes for this alarming development, and no amount of law enforcement and coercion will halt the flow of volunteers of West European Muslims to join the ranks of violent extremists other than inclusion.

To successfully counter violent extremism, West European countries, together with Muslim leaders and educators in their respective communities, must investigate who is embracing radical views through field studies, raise awareness, and analyze the real root causes in different Muslim communities, which was and still is missing.

This approach would enable them to present credible counter-arguments with candid, transparent, and open-ended dialogue that could change the socio-economic and political dynamics to create a new atmosphere that would single out young Muslims in a positive light. To that end, West European governments must:

Adopt a new public narrative by using a strategic way to communicate utilizing every conceivable media outlet to counter extremists with facts, avoid moral preaching, and address the perception of Western nations assailing Muslims, which leads the young to seek justice through violence;

Develop community service programs to introduce young Muslims to the larger community of their Western peers and begin a process of integration in which they develop personal interests to fill the social, economic, and political emptiness they feel;

Invite credible and respected voices from the Muslim world to discredit the messages of the extremists—that there is no path to glory in death, that joining such violent groups only reinforces the vicious cycle of death and destruction, and that there is no martyrdom in their senseless self-sacrifices;

Encourage young Muslims to join sport activities and provide opportunities to show off their talent and ability to excel, while supporting those who seek to establish their social identity and be recognized;

Prevent prisons from becoming incubators for new terrorists by rehabilitating prisoners through community programs, schooling, professional enhancements, and assigning of responsibility within the prison's setting; nearly 80 percent of prisoners who went through such rigorous programs in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Yemen ended up being completely rehabilitated and became role models for other prisoners to emulate;

Foster the desire of young Muslims to participate in local political discussion groups, be involved in the decision-making process from the bottom up, and be part of any positive changes to advance the interests of their communities and enhance their self-esteem;

Develop international exchange programs to expose young Muslims to what is happening in other communities, areas of social and economic progress, and new innovations and ideas that can be duplicated to benefit their own families and communities;

Finally, all of these programs require a commitment for long-term funding. No country directly or indirectly affected by violent extremism can afford to be long on talking and short on funding.

They must provide the financial and human resources to meet this unprecedented challenge, regardless of how costly and how long it might take.

Given that the violent turmoil sweeping the Middle East—especially the Sunni-Shia conflict and the civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya—is unlikely to settle any time soon, a growing number of young Muslims will join the ranks of extremists posing an ever-greater national security menace for Western countries.

For this reason, we must distinguish between what's possible and what's impossible to achieve, and what might become more probable if circumstances change.

Western governments must develop a long-term deradicalization strategy to stem the flow of Muslim volunteers with the objective of substantially reducing the threat they pose upon their return to their respective countries. There is no shortcut and no other means by which to deradicalize young Muslims other than by taking the measures outlined above, and approaches tailored to specific communities.

Failure is not an option as the consequences will be extraordinarily dire. A state of constant alarm, emergencies, and terrorism will become a way of life, haunting Western democracies and violently destabilizing the Middle East for decades to come.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/integration-is-the-open-secret-to-deradicalization/>

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