

# COMMENTARY

No.288

Tuesday, 5 May 2015

## **The Shortcut to Deradicalization is the Long Road**

**Alon Ben-Meir**

**New York University**

Every Arab state, regardless of the extent to which it is involved in combating violent extremism, must recognize that there is no shortcut to defeating this scourge, and those who are looking for quick fixes are in for a rude awakening. Whereas military force is selectively necessary to destroy irredeemably ruthless and bloodthirsty organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), to neutralize violent extremism in the long-term, no amount of military muscle will suffice. The Arab states must realize that the root causes of radicalization are embedded in their internal socio-economic and political disorder, and only by undertaking systematic and consistent measures to cure this domestic malaise will violent radicalization abate.

Although the West, especially Britain and France and at a later stage the US, have not been without fault and contributed to the plight of the Arab masses, Arab leaders can no longer blame their problems on Western powers.

The decades-long suppression, suffering and servitude that the Arab masses, especially the young, have endured under largely corrupt and uncaring leaders with an insatiable hunger for power in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and others has reached a new tipping point.

The Arab states must now understand that their youths' awakening, manifested in the Arab Spring, is only at the beginning stages. Those states who have not, as yet, been engulfed by the Arab Spring and argue that it was only a fading phenomenon are deeply misguided, as it is only a question of time when the rise of Arab youth will reach their shores to haunt them.

The convergence of a plethora of jihadist groups into Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen is not accidental, and as long as grievances, hopelessness, and desolation prevail, they will continue to provide fertile ground for radical Islamists to step in and capitalize on public despair.

There is certainly no single road to radicalization – some join violent radical groups to acquire a sense of belonging, others seek to shed their daily indignities, some are swayed by the desire for recognition or integration, others are drawn by the lure of adventure or heroism, and yet others because they have no other outlet to vent their grievances in the absence of due justice or any access to the political process.

The common denominator is that these young men and women have become estranged from their own communities and are open to almost any path that would lead them to a new meaning and purpose to their lives, even in death. Voltaire got it right when he said, “Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.”

Not surprisingly, for every terrorist or jihadist killed or captured, two or three more are recruited. This suggests that regardless of how much military force is used and irrespective of the efforts made to rehabilitate captured radicals by some Arab states (including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iraq), there will be no end to violent extremism.

Therefore, Arab states must either embark now on social, economic, and political reforms that offer a new horizon and hope for a better and brighter future, or be swept away by escalating violent extremism that will destroy the political foundation on which these regimes rest; Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen provide glaring examples.

There is no panacea that would bring an end to violent extremism. It will take a decade or more before meaningful change and stability occurs, and only if a) there is a strategy in place to deal with the aftermath of the defeat (as a prerequisite) of ISIS and other major violent extremist groups (to be discussed in next week’s article), and b) the Arab states embark upon building a sustainable socio-economic and political structure (while the war against extremism is continuing) to mitigate the outcry of the masses who want these changes that they will otherwise seek by some other means, including violence.

In order to do this, the Arab states must first begin to reduce the growing gap between rich and poor. Nothing is more devastating than witnessing how the wealthy in most Arab states ride on the backs of the poor, and how the governments do next to nothing to lift the majority of the people from abject poverty.

Equitable distribution of resources is not a handout that provides temporary relief from daily hardships. Equitable distribution means, among other things, the allocation of funds to build

infrastructure as well as schools, health clinics, and water management systems, and the creation of new jobs that benefit the average person.

Although the Arab youth are impatient and want instant improvements, as long as government efforts are genuine and the youth are experiencing tangible and sustained progress, they will embrace it as it offers the promise of a better tomorrow.

Second: Arab governments must commit themselves to social and political reforms to end the marginalization of the vast majority of the population. Social and political reforms should not necessarily translate to a full-fledged democracy.

However, providing larger doses of social justice and political freedom in conjunction with economic development is necessary to allow for steady progress without threatening the government's hold on power.

Instead of shoving Western-style democracy down their throats, which precipitated counter revolution (Egypt), chaos, and civil wars (Syria, Iraq, Libya), the Arab states will develop over time their own brand of democracy consistent with their culture and religion.

Stemming radicalization does not rest as much on democratic reform but on a commitment to human rights. The Arab youth are more concerned with job opportunities and living with dignity, than being given the right to vote while still living in abject poverty.

Third: perhaps nothing halts violent extremism more than empowerment of the ordinary people. Nothing can achieve that more directly and efficiently than sustainable development projects, which require a relatively small amount of money but yield disproportionately rewarding returns.

Sustainable development is not a new concept. It has been shown time and again that self-enablement, generated by the creation of wealth, provides solid family life and a sense of belonging, the absence of which pushes people to seek it elsewhere through radicalization. Poverty-ridden Arab states in particular must make sustainable development projects a priority in their fight against violent extremism.

Giving small communities the opportunity to choose and develop their own projects not only provides economic stability, but also engenders collaborative efforts by members of the community and fosters a free decision-making process to achieve their goal, which is the essence of self-empowerment.

Toward this goal, participatory democratic planning—where communities themselves identify, implement, and benefit from their priority human development projects—is the key element to sustainability. Effective implementation is essential, and directly engaging the remote and marginalized communities require a high level of commitment for a long period of time.

Fourth: given that the population of many Arab states is composed of different sects, races, religions, and tribes, their different aspirations and goals invite radical groups or states to exploit such division and discord within communities.

As a case in point, while the rivalry and proxy war between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran for regional hegemony is not likely to be settled in the foreseeable future, every Arab state must not allow the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia to deepen the divide between the Sunnis and the Shiites that live within their borders.

Iran is bent on sowing the seeds of discontent among the Shiite minority, be they in Bahrain, Yemen, or Saudi Arabia. The only way to deny Iran or violent extremist groups the opportunity to pry into the internal affairs of any Arab states is by not discriminating against minorities, and peacefully reconciling discord between the various segments of the population.

There are other important measures the Arab states must take to prevent many would-be Islamists from joining the ranks of the radicals that deserve special attention:

- Reform prisons to prevent them from becoming incubators for radicalization;
- Introduce new courses in all educational institutions to teach the moral codes of Islam and in particular the sanctity of human life;
- Use media outlets to promote public dialogue led by reputed religious scholars to discuss the positive role of Islam in the life of ordinary Muslims, and strongly refute the misinterpretation and abuse of Quranic teaching that radicals use to kill, rape, and maim in the name of God;
- Encourage political leaders to speak day-in and day-out against violent extremists;
- Ensure that Imams use the pulpits of mosques as the venue from which to preach messages of moderation and amity instead of allowing mosques to become hubs for radicalization, and offer youth an alternative and constructive way of living instead of trying to find salvation in death;
- Move with deliberation and implement their decision to create a united, robust, and combat-ready military force that will have two main objectives: a) to deter Iran from further interference in their domestic affairs, and b) to destroy its terrorist networks, whose main mission is to destabilize one Arab country after another.

Unfortunately, many of the remedies the Arab states must take to obstruct the tide of radicalization are easier to prescribe than to implement, as there are no quick fixes and the shortcut to deradicalization is a long and hazardous road.

Given the continuing widespread death and destruction sweeping the Middle East, however, the Arab states have little choice but to develop a long-term comprehensive strategy to deal with the ever-looming menace of radical Islamists; failing to do so will be at their own peril.

The Arab states face an unprecedented challenge posed by violent extremism. They can address it only by providing what their youth needs the most—hope, opportunity, and a life of dignity.

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

**Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in US and international newspapers. Email: [alon@alonben-meir.com](mailto:alon@alonben-meir.com)**

---

**As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, **MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy****