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CONCLUSION PAPER

Small-scale expert meeting

30 March 2022, Digital

Dealing with (potential) dissemination of extremist ideology and radicalisation within unofficial prayer rooms

Key outcomes

The RAN small-scale meeting on 'Dealing with dissemination of extremist ideology and radicalisation within unofficial prayer rooms' took place on 30 March 2022. This meeting brought together first-line practitioners with experience with unofficial and official prayer rooms. The practitioners were working for local authorities, were social workers, prison officers, police officers or practitioners working in refugee/asylum seeker facilities. The meeting served as an opportunity to explore to what extent the dissemination of extremist ideology and radicalisation is a pressing issue at the moment, how to detect these activities and how to deal with the phenomenon.

Some of the key findings of the meeting are listed below.

- The participants did not consider the dissemination of extremist ideology and radicalisation in unofficial prayer rooms to be a big issue at the moment. The situation was more pressing in the past, especially in the context of "cities, towns and villages", but currently the participants did **not face many challenges regarding this phenomenon**.
- The **discussion should not be restricted to (un)official prayer rooms**. Disseminating extremist messages can also happen in other social contexts where people initially gather together for innocent social activities, but where at some point extremist messages are being shared.
- To prevent this phenomenon it was recommended in every context discussed during this meeting ("cities, towns and villages", "asylum seeker and refugee facilities", and "prisons") to invest in **connecting with the communities** that live in that context and **build trustful relationships** to find out about the existence of unofficial prayer rooms and receive signals about the potential spread of extremist messages.

This paper will first describe the main theme discussed during the meeting. Recommendations concerning the dissemination of extremist ideology in unofficial prayer rooms in 1) cities, towns and villages, 2) asylum seeker and refugee facilities, and 3) prisons are outlined in the second part. The paper concludes with general recommendations, relevant practices and suggestions for further reading.

Highlights of the discussion

The following insights and challenges were presented and discussed by experienced practitioners.

(Un)official prayer rooms and other social contexts

What makes a prayer room “unofficial”? Unofficial prayer rooms are not officially designed to be a prayer room and are not part of the official contacts of, or partnerships with, for instance, local authorities. There can be a grey area between official and unofficial with different levels of contacts, approval and cooperation with the authorities. Unofficial prayer rooms may vary in size and can be found in, for example, living rooms, basements and parking garages. As a side note, one of the participants explained that according to the prophet the whole of Earth is a place for praying, except a cemetery or a toilet. Another participant mentioned that in the early years of Islam in Europe everything started as “unofficial”. Applying regulations brought more and more official prayer rooms. Becoming official and adhering to the associated regulations is important for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), because transparency will be improved and there will be more opportunities to build P/CVE safeguarding partnerships or influence the people running the unofficial prayer rooms. However, it is also important because official prayer rooms have to adhere to regulations regarding fire security, hygiene and other important matters. The participants expressed different challenges regarding prayer rooms based on the country or city they live in:

- ❖ Many unofficial prayer rooms because there is a lack of official ones.
- ❖ Many official prayer rooms, but they do not meet the needs of the community. Examples are an imam who doesn't speak the language of the visitors or no room for social activities like meeting others and discussing important matters. As a consequence, people go to unofficial prayer rooms or other places that meet their needs.

Regarding the dissemination of extremist ideology and radicalisation, it was mentioned that limiting the discussion to official and unofficial prayer rooms is too restrictive. We are missing out on other “social contexts”, not being prayer rooms, where people gather for innocent social activities that could be followed by practicing and studying a religion and “minutes later recruitment and group radicalisation takes place,” according to one of the participants. A normal conversation can transfer into a conversation where extremist ideas are being shared. For example, when a group of people get together in a park or a living room. It starts as a normal social gathering but at a certain point someone grabs their phone and starts showing extremist videos.

Context 1: Cities, towns and villages

The first context discussed was cities, towns and villages. Participants stated that the dissemination of extremist ideology and radicalisation in unofficial prayer rooms was a pressing issue a couple of years ago, but not so much at the moment. An important factor here could be that many participants started to invest in preventive measures.

Recommendations:

- To find out about the existence of unofficial prayer rooms and to receive signals about the potential spread of extremist messages, invest in **connecting with religious communities and institutions and build trustful relationships**.

- Facilitate contact between police and the community and create an exchange platform, but do not only focus on P/CVE. Take a **broader approach** and also offer the community support with other issues they face.
- **Get in contact with people active** in unofficial prayer rooms to get an insight of the visitors and who is preaching. Another option would be, if possible, to make the unofficial prayer rooms official. When a prayer room becomes official, partnerships can be built and there is better control over what is happening inside. Furthermore, other important aspects can be handled as well: the prayer room will have to adhere to regulations regarding, for example, fire security and hygiene.

Context 2: Asylum seekers and refugee facilities

The second context the participants discussed were the asylum seekers and refugee facilities. In some countries there are no official prayer rooms in asylum seeker or refugee facilities. People can pray in their own room or tent or there is a larger tent available to pray together. In these places there are no official imams, so usually the oldest visitor is leading the ceremony. In other countries where no official prayer rooms are present in the facilities, people are told they can visit the nearby mosque and sometimes a representative is invited to come to the facility to invite them to visit one of the local mosques. If a mosque is not close by, some countries decided to transfer the people to a facility that has a mosque close by. In the discussions, it was mentioned that in some cases the authorities needed to be reminded that they should cater to the needs of every religion.

Participants from different regions shared the impression that in this specific context, there was not a real problem with extremism and radicalisation in general or linked with unofficial prayer rooms. Even the sometimes suggested cases of recruitment of minors by radical Salafi recruiters hasn't been very successful. Furthermore, participants stated that people often refrain from unwanted behaviour in this context because they want a positive outcome of the asylum procedure. The few minor incidents that took place were dealt with by engaging with the individuals and stressing their behaviour was problematic and could have consequences. On other occasions, the room was "closed for renovation" and two of the three men were transferred to another facility. Some other problematic behaviour that was deemed extremist or radicalised was upon closer look assessed as frustrated provocation against staff, society or "the system". Further, there were also cases where it seemed that people "shared extremist videos" while they had actually shared information and news about their country of origin or hometown.

Recommendations:

- If there are no official prayer rooms in the facility, **offer alternatives**. Allow people to pray in their own room or suggest to them to visit a nearby official prayer room.
- **Train staff on radicalisation and religion** to avoid the risk that angry frustrated behaviour is being, incorrectly, perceived as radicalisation or extremism.
- Stimulate staff to build **good relations** with the asylum seekers and refugees, which gives staff an opportunity to be informed in an early phase about potential problems and deal with them accordingly. If there are intolerant groups or individuals, the staff is often informed by people in the facilities who feel threatened by the intolerant groups.
- Have a **policy of neutrality**. If unofficial prayer rooms cause problems, don't allow them for the reason that there should be "no public demonstration of religion" in the facility instead of making it personal.

Context 3: Prisons

The prison community is living in a regulated environment. Practicing one's religion is a fundamental value and religion is considered to be supportive for reintegration, so prisons try to cater to every religion. In the meeting the perception arose that unofficial prayer rooms are not often encountered, so they are not the setting for potential radicalisation and extremism in prison environments. Prisons try to prevent the phenomenon of unofficial prayer rooms by providing prayer rooms and chaplains. Praying in labour facilities, kitchens, recreational spaces or other

shared places is often not allowed, but there is always the risk that extremist messages are being disseminated in these places.

Recommendations:

- Facilitate the exercise of **religious professions**, cooperate with chaplains and offer prisoners access to spiritual counsellors.
- Design and furnish a prayer room to be used under the guidance of an official chaplain/imam, and offer **group talks** supervised by the chaplain/imam.
- Invest in good relationships with prisoners to pick up signals of the dissemination of extremist ideology, and **connect to their communities and faith-based organisations** to better understand the prisoners.
- Benefit from the online world. If praying together with others is physically impossible, it could be **facilitated digitally**.
- If prisoners try to pray together in, for example, labour facilities, **be aware** that if you allow this, this can lead to further sacralisation of the space and possibly creates space for ideology.

General recommendations for policymakers

- According to the participants of this meeting, the dissemination of extremist ideology and radicalisation in unofficial prayer rooms is not a pressing issue at the moment. Further, they suggested **to not only focus on unofficial prayer rooms**, since this phenomenon can be present in other social contexts as well.
- **Create official prayer rooms.** This will help not only to strengthen P/CVE but also to improve the safety of visitors with regard to hygiene and fire security. Further, create prayer rooms where people cannot only pray but also meet others and discuss religious matters or related issues that are important to them.

Relevant practices

The [Cooperation Network – Living together safely \(KoSiZu\)](#) aims to establish a network of security authorities and Muslim stakeholders in Germany, as well as to promote dialogue by establishing common exchange formats. KoSiZu focuses on topics like religious extremism, anti-Muslim sentiment and security around mosques. Furthermore, they help with the implementation of cooperation projects that are beneficial to the dialogue. This means that it creates the basis for effective teamwork between police authorities at national and local level and mosque associations, or with other places in which Muslim life is practiced.

Further reading

The RAN Youth and Education (Y&E) Working Group discussed the topic of non-formal education several times during their meetings and the RAN LOCAL Working Group discussed the topic of cooperating with religious organisations within the local approach in the past. The solutions discussed during the Y&E and LOCAL meetings have an overlap with what was discussed during this meeting, namely the need for collaboration. For more information, please read the following RAN papers:

- RAN Y&E. (2021). [Education and Youth Work: Working with Community Figures both Inside and Outside Schools](#), Conclusion Paper. Digital meeting, 5-6 October 2021.
- RAN Y&E. (2020). [Dealing with the Co-existence of Formal and Non-formal Education](#), Conclusion Paper. Digital meeting, 4-5 November 2020.
- RAN LOCAL. (2016). [How to cooperate with religious organisations and communities within the local approach to radicalisation?](#), Ex Post Paper. Brussels, Belgium: RAN Centre of Excellence, 8 December 2016.