EX POST PAPER
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RAN EDU meeting on dealing with religion-inspired extremist ideologies in school

While "*schools have the objective to provide a safe and respectful learning environment for their students*",[1] teachers, educators, social workers, and other front-line professionals working with pupils at school are increasingly confronted with challenges linked to religion-inspired extremist ideologies that polarise European societies and are echoed in classrooms.

On 14-15 November, teachers, principals, social workers, researchers, and practitioners from the education sector that cope with these challenges gathered in Antwerp (BE). The meeting addressed how to pedagogically deal with claims, grievances, real or perceived injustices, controversial questions, and sensitive issues related to the religious sphere of children. This is considered crucial for promoting a democratic space of reflection and protecting students from extremist propaganda.

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[1] "Manifesto for Education – Empowering Educators and Schools", 2015, retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/docs/manifesto-for-education-empowering-educators-and-schools_en.pdf

Introduction

The territorial collapse of the self-proclaimed 'caliphate', or **Islamic State**, **does not mean the end of its violent ideology** and its potentially powerful influence on vulnerable and sensitive targets such as children.[2] Family issues, the perception of social marginalisation, the complexity of religious doctrine or political events, and the many challenges of youth in everyday life are frequently exploited by Daesh as instruments with which to build a bridge between its violent ideology and the life of children. Addressing claims, grievances, real or perceived injustices, controversial questions, and sensitive issues associated with the religious sphere of students is key to fostering a democratic space of reflection and safeguarding students from extremist propaganda.

With this in mind, the **RAN EDU working group discussed radicalisation and extremism definitions**, key violent **narratives**, **recruitment strategies**, main reported **issues on religious education,** and **pedagogical perspectives** to face growing challenges concerning religion-inspired extremist ideologies in school and to prevent radicalisation.

Islamist Extremism (IE) was particularly addressed during the meeting since in the past few years DAESH has tried to "*indoctrinate, recruit and operationalise children to both populate its 'state' and swell its army*".[3] Indeed, children represent an easy target for extremist groups, especially "*because of their young age and psychological malleability*".[4]

With respect to this form of extremism, participants discussed and focused on:

- **polarisation issues** that can lead to young people feeling excluded and therefore more vulnerable to religion-inspired extremist ideologies;
- differences in **religious education policies** in schools across Europe;
- the role of **gender and family** in radicalisation processes and within extremist groups;
- main challenges and **controversial issues** to manage in the classroom;
- potential problems posed by **subsidiary educational structures** such as Madrassas and Quran schools;
- **educational programmes** that explore questions of identity with students.

The Varying Nature of Educational Policies in the EU

Policies on religious education vary from country to country in the EU, and sometimes even within the same country. In France, for instance, religious education is not taught in schools, with the exception of those in the regions of Alsace and Lorraine.[5] In Germany, religious education is a regular subject in public schools, but the regulations vary between federal states. In The Netherlands, the subject is free of choice in public secondary schools and it is not based on a particular religion or belief, while private schools may have a religious or ideological character.[6] In Slovenia, religious education is not part of the school curriculum, while in Sweden it is compulsory with no opt-out possibility. In Luxembourg, the topic of religion has been included within the broader "Life and Society" class, while in Italy religious education is compulsory with a possible dispensation.

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[2] In this ex-post paper we consider a child any individual below the age of 18 according to the definition of the term provided by the United Nations.

[3] UNODC, "Prevention of child recruitment ad exploitation by terrorist and violent extremist groups: The role of the justice system", Vienna, 2019, p. 29.

[4] Ivi, p. 2.

[5] See Luis Del Espino Díaz, "A Comparative Analysis of Religious Education in Europe and Educational Guidelines in the Framework of Interreligious dialogue and a Culture of Peace", in *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol 9, N. 1, January 2018, p. 50.

[6] See Government of the Netherlands, "Public-authority and private schools", retrieved from https://www.government.nl/topics/freedom-of-education/public-authority-and-private-schools

While there is no common standard between different Member States, governments, and policymakers on the role of religion in school, European societies can **find equal footing** and unity in their shared **democratic values**. Indeed, despite a wide variety of policies and approaches dealing with religion in school, all EU Member States share common grounds in terms of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion under Article 10 of the **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights**.[7]

The EU is indisputably characterised by cultural and religious diversity. Nonetheless, the problem of religion-inspired extremism concerns everyone and does not leave any room for ignoring it. Voids left by Member States, nations, politics, and laws constitute an easy breeding ground for extremist ideologies.

Religion-inspired Extremism In Schools

While some countries consider spiritually-based issues as personal matters, not addressing students' grievances, sense of injustice, extreme ideas or behaviour, and not adequately dealing with sensitive questions in the classroom could present a risk. Indeed, if such conversations do not take place, students could be looking for answers from other sources that preach narratives aimed at recruiting them in extremist groups. In the last few years, for instance, **IE has targeted children** using education to narrow their horizons by claiming to act on behalf of their religion.

IE is an umbrella concept for different forms of non-violent and violence-promoting extremist groups within both Sunni and Shia Islam. It may be divided into three categories based on the type of activity engaged in[8]:

1. Jihadism, whose members engage in political violence;
2. Islamism, which is non-violent political activism that establishes extremist political parties or uses parallel legal systems;
3. Islamic fundamentalism, whose members engage in religious extremist activities.

All these three categories clash with some of the cornerstones of European democratic rule of law and individual human rights.

Main Narratives That Act As Destructive Forces

Pupils in both primary and secondary school are in the process of learning, exploring different worldviews, and developing opinions. Sometimes, real or perceived injustices, a feeling of victimhood and powerlessness, grievances relating to marginalisation, alienation, social frustration, and humiliation can constitute the breeding ground for politico-religious, extremist-inspired ideologies and narratives. These narratives can be built on **ideology**, **misinformation**, **prejudice**, and can fuel discord and tension between youth and their communities.

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[7] "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance".
[8] See, RAN, "RAN Policy & Practice Workshop – Narratives and Strategies of Far-Right and Islamist Extremists", 2019, retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_pp_workshop_narratives_strategies_of_far-right_and_islamist_extremists_amsterdam_20190704_en.pdf

Experts and practitioners agree that the most recurrent narratives are as follows:

Diagnostic frame (emotions)	Prognostic frame (empowerment)	Motivational frame (support for action)
Victimhood	"Jihad is an individual duty"	"We are in the vanguard of Islam and only defender against oppression"
Humiliation	"The West is at war with Islam.This is just a war"	The "Al-wala' wa-l-bara' narrative (loyalty and enmity)"
Injustice	"We need you and anyone can contribute"	"The Caliphate is the perfect society according to Islamic principles"
Oppression	"Sunni Islam is facing a crusader alliance composed of Shi'is, Christians, and Jews"	Double salvation narrative: "All your sins will be cleansed" and the promise to enter into paradise before all other believers

The **justification of violence** in service of a greater good and the claim that humanity is composed of **superior and inferior groups of people** were highlighted during the meeting as two additional key concepts that provide more evidence of the binary nature of these narratives.

How Islamist Extremists Recruit Children

Researchers identified a number of **strategies pursued by Islamist extremists** to target and recruit children, such as: [9]

- promotion of public events with a hidden agenda;
- recruitment of parents who will introduce their children to extreme ideologies and, in some cases, take them into the conflict zones;
- exploitation of primary and secondary school drop-out rates;
- attempt to spread intolerant forms of Islam in some schools with a religious orientation;
- proselytism in schools by peers;
- exploitation of the trauma of children exposed to violence;
- use of social media to spread propaganda and fake news;
- publication of magazines such as the "Youth of the Caliphate magazine" managed by pro-IS groups and media;
- use of other communication material such as video games and interactive media designed to attract youth.

During the meeting, it was found that the main recruitment locations are the following:

- online recruitment;
- mosques and underground study circles;
- recruitment hotspots with radical feeder groups;
- prisons;
- schools and higher education institutes.

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[9] The list is composed by the findings of different studies: Gina Vale, "Cubs in the Lions' Den", op. cit; UNODC, "Prevention of child recruitment ad exploitation by terrorist and violent extremist groups: The role of the justice system", op. cit.; Samantha de Silva, "Role of Education in the Prevention of Violent Extremism", retrieved from http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/448221510079762554/120997-WP-revised-PUBLIC-Role-of-Education-in-Prevention-of-Violence-Extremism-Final.pdf; Europol, Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2019, p. 36; "RAN Factbook. A practical introduction to Islamist extremism", p. 14.

There are different lines within the complex debate on radicalisation's root causes and recruitment factors into IE. However, it is widely acknowledged that both ideological influences and socio-economic factors matter in the radicalisation process, along with a kaleidoscope of contributing factors ranging from identity crisis to political and socio-psychological issues.

Gender-Specific Factors in Recruitment

During the meeting, **isolation**, **loneliness**, and the **difficulty of finding a life partner** were some of the issues highlighted that are believed to play a role in the recruitment of both men and women in extremist groups. Additionally, other issues arose such as the **need to reconcile work and family,** especially for women, and the **desire for clarity and security** in everyday life. In response to these needs, it has been noted that extremist groups propose a mix of progressive and conservative values such as purity, loyalty, authority, care, fairness, and freedom.

It was also found that the images and photos of families (existing or propagandised) used by extremist groups are central to their ideological framework and very similar in various extremist tendencies. Indeed, they can help to better understand narratives, roles, and behaviours in this context.

The table below contains the main insights derived from the meeting regarding women and men in extremist groups:

WOMEN AND MEN IN EXTREMIST GROUPS	
WOMEN	**MEN**
Guarantor of the "purity" of the nation and of the honour of the family	Protection of their persecuted women and communities from assaults by foreign men
As mothers, socialising children into the politico-religious ideological mindset	Respect for one's own women and devaluation of "western" women
The promise of modernised motherhood, with work and family	Head of family, decider
Being a fighter and comrade-in-arms	Antifeminism in all its forms
Equality of all Muslim women	Construction of masculinity through devaluation of other masculinities (especially homosexuality)
A supporter of men	Warrior, fighter, hero
Strict gender segregation	Strict gender segregation

Furthermore, attacks conducted by **female extremists**, especially young girls, [10] tend to receive more **visibility by the media**. Extremist groups try to exploit this international media attention to spread their propaganda and promote a "***David and Goliath story*** *in which enemy forces are manipulated into the uncomfortable position of fighting against children*"[11] and women.

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[10] Young girls constitute a specific target audience for organisations such as DAESH. Recruiters address their propaganda to women and girls calling them "sisters of the Islamic State". Besides using the typical recruitment strategies, DAESH provides direct messages to them, especially: writing specific publications; placing active women as groomers; dedicating specific online chats for women.

[11] Gina Vale, Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory, ICSR, 2018, p. 10.

The Role of Schools and Teachers in Preventing Radicalisation

Schools have a crucial role to play in helping to **protect children from extremist ideologies**. A review of the existing literature indicates a number of school practices across EU Member States that fall under the scope of P/CVE:

- fostering democratic values;
- ensuring balanced debates in the classroom;
- ensuring that every student feels seen and heard;
- offering competencies for democratic citizenship;
- integrating students from different cultural backgrounds;
- managing discourse reflecting social polarisation;
- addressing debates on identity and religious issues;
- engaging in dialogue with students to discover reasons behind changing looks and attitudes;
- raising awareness on the danger of indoctrination and radicalisation;
- detecting possible cases of radicalisation.

At the same time, irrespective of different contexts and legal frameworks, several challenges for the entire school system have been reported in the literature[12] and confirmed during the meeting, such as:

- challenge of transferring theoretical "prevent material" into classroom settings;
- difficulty in clearly distinguishing between provocation of children who are in the process of exploring different worldviews and signs of a radicalisation process is a matter of concern for many teachers;
- changing their role "from experts to facilitators" when it comes to speaking about sensitive and/or controversial topics in the classroom is a difficult challenge for some teachers;
- in countries where teachers are requested to report cases of radicalisation among their pupils, some are concerned about the consequences their reporting may have on students;
- resistance to female authority in the classroom has been reported by some teachers due to their gender ("women are inferior");
- lack of diversity and pluralistic views has been reported in some schools where perceptions of society are very unrealistic, making it difficult to teach and discuss topics such as gender equality, homosexuality or freedom of religion;
- teacher's religion can influence what to discuss or not in the classroom;
- lack of professional translators for teachers has been reported in those cases where pupils' parents do not speak the local language;
- difficulty in or abscence of dialogue between teachers and policymakers, with the latter often being far removed from the real problems in classrooms;
- lack of a European overarching policy on approaches and projects that deal with religious education, ideology, and polarisation in the school system can increase the risk of religious extremists in using schools to recruit children.

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[12] The lists below stem from the study of the existing literature and the interviews conducted by the European Foundation for Democracy to teachers and social workers in Europe in order to write practical handbooks to help them addressing controversial issues in the classrooms and prevent radicalisation.

Controversial Issues Reaffirmed in the Classroom

Specific controversial questions discussed at school were reported during the meeting, particularly about students' **identity**, **religious beliefs**, **sexual orientation**, **ethnic origins**, and **different cultural backgrounds**. In addition, several other sensitive issues were put forth:

- questioning of some democratic and constitutional values on religious grounds;
- discussions linked to politico-religious issues, and events at home and overseas;
- watching politico-religious extremist propaganda videos online;
- students from patriarchally structured families who devaluate the role of women;
- girls who are not allowed to take part in class trips;
- pupils wearing inappropriate clothing for physical education classes or chemistry classes;
- children who have concerns about engaging in sports like swimming where clothing may conflict with cultural or religious values;
- devaluation of women;
- racism and anti-Semitism;
- conspiracy and apocalyptic theories;
- proselytism.

Islamic Schools: A Double Edged Sword?

The intersection of religion and education does not relate only to secular schools. The presence of faith-based schools in multicultural and plural societies has sparked great debate in the last few years. This is the case, for instance, for private or state-funded **Islamic schools**. According to some scholars, they can help improve pluralism in societies. However, according to other studies, these schools can also contribute to the phenomenon of terrorism.[13] The meeting in Antwerp reflected the existence of different viewpoints regarding the significance of educational methods that focus on strengthening Muslim identity. For some, this leads to a "*haram and halal culture*" at schools, while for others it can help to foster resilience against extremist ideologies.

Educational Islamic structures include '**madrassas**'. Muslim children often attend madrassas to learn Arabic, how to recite the Quran or acquire Islam jurisprudence knowledge.

The case of the United Kingdom was discussed during the meeting. It was revealed that around 300 000 children, predominantly aged 7-11, often attend madrassas after school and during weekends. Resources for these structures mainly originate from Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. A number of critical issues emerged from the discussion and were reported, including:

- evidence of homophobic teaching;
- issues related to faith and friendship, such as the prohibition of maintaining friendships with non-Muslim children;
- inadequate sex education;
- absence of formal inspection;
- concern that 5-12 hours of tuition in madrassas can be tiring for children, and that this can negatively impact their schoolwork;
- issues related to the spread of messages at odds with British values and conflicts with the main schools' ethos and values.

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[13] See M. Danish Shakeel, "Islamic Schooling in the Cultural West: A Systematic Review of the Issues Concerning School Choice", in "Religions", November 2018, p. 2.

A teacher who worked for a secondary state-funded Islamic school reported that she was asked to change her wardrobe, and that there was a strict physical division in the rooms between males and females. In addition, many books were forbidden, and she gave details about not being able to teach or show her pupils anything that was not closely related to what they had already experienced in that school. The fact that the staff can be bullied and harassed for disagreeing or expressing their concerns was also conveyed during the meeting.

Pedagogical Perspectives in Preventing Radicalisation and Recruitment

There is no simple response to addressing all these complex issues and challenges. However, stimulating children to develop **critical thinking**, engaging them in a **democratic experience at school**, and helping them to cultivate **conflict resolution skills** are widely acknowledged as good practices for prevention. Indeed, as clearly stated by many educators in other RAN EDU meetings, "*schools fulfil their main preventive role when they act as 'laboratories' for democracy: as distinct pedagogical environments where the significant polarising issues of our time can be addressed [...].*"[14]

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[14] Götz Nordbruch and Stijn Sieckelinck, "Transforming schools into labs for democracy. A companion to preventing violent radicalisation through education", Product of the RAN Centre of Excellence, 2018, p. 11, retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran_edu_transforming_schools_into_labs_for_democracy_2018_en.pdf

**'Samoan Circle':
facilitating discussion of
controversial issues**

A very practical example of how schools can act as laboratories for democracy was demonstrated during the meeting in Antwerp by a group of secondary school students from the "GO! Koninklijk Atheneum Antwerpen" programme. Using the 'Samoan Circle' meeting process, students discussed controversial identity topics: sexual orientation, homophobia, racism, different cultural behaviours. The Samoan Circle does not require the use of moderators, chairs, or facilitators. Consequently, maintaining discipline is a duty of the participants who gather in two concentric circles: an inner circle with four chairs and an outer circle where participants can walk or be seated. Once the topic of discussion was presented, students who wanted to share their thoughts took a chair in the inner circle while the other participants remained seated in the outer circle. In the inner circle, each student commented or asked questions about the topic at hand. When someone wanted to speak but all the chairs in the inner circle were occupied, he/she stood behind a chair in the inner circle to motion he/she would like to have a chair to speak. No outside conversations are allowed. This practice facilitates the exchange of information and different points of view. In some cases, users experience spontaneous resolutions of conflicting views.

**Athena-syntax:
using common vaues and
worldviews to counter extremism**

"Athena-syntax Where Art and Education Meet" was presented during the meeting as another practical example of "school as labs for democracy". It began as an educational school project at the "GO! Koninklijk Atheneum Antwerpen", and is now organised as a non-profit organisation.

The project stems from the observation of students who were confused by different narratives (and related discrepancies) on the themes of origin and evolution. Teachers of science, religions and worldviews elaborated various projects to foster dialogue on these topics among different school subjects. Interreligious and philosophical dialogues are at the very core of this learning pathway that encourages participation in active citizenship and civil society. These projects also involve professional artists to help students explore sensitive topics outside the classroom.

The **family unit** was acknowledged as particularly important in the prevention of child radicalisation and recruitment during the meeting. Teachers and educators should cooperate with families in dealing with sensitive issues relating to their pupils, especially in primary schools.[15] Further, this cooperation could present an opportunity to monitor cases where families appear to introduce and cultivate extreme ideas to their children. In the latter case, schools represent one of the very few settings "where practitioners can work undisturbedly with the child outside of the family".[16]

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[15] Building bridges and fostering dialogue with parents as well as cooperating with other organisations in a multiagency approach can help schools to better contribute in creating a safe environment for their pupils.
[16] RAN, 'Vulnerable children who are brought up in an extremist environment', Ex Post Paper, p. 5, retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-yf-and-c/docs/ran_yf-c_vulnerable_children_who_brought_up_extremist_environment_21-22_06_2018_en.pdf

Recommendations for tackling extremist ideologies

Participants concluded the two-day meeting by discussing the main insights. These fed into a series of recommendations for headmasters, teachers, and governments in dealing with religion-inspired extremist ideologies in school.

General Recommendations

- The process of continuous improvement in schools for confronting religion-inspired extremist ideologies is constant and needs ongoing training.
- Never ignore extremist ideologies echoed in the classroom.
- Consider the importance of the specific legal framework of each European country and the specific attitudes of every teacher in achieving results concerning prevention.
- Improve critical thinking and media literacy of students with conspiracy theories, intolerant views, and other manipulation techniques based on religious groundings.
- Do not just speak about inclusion in the classroom. Include!
- Headmasters, teachers, school educators, psychologists, social workers, law enforcement, municipalities, and governments need to closely cooperate to prevent the spread of religious extremist ideologies at school.

Recommendations for Headmasters

- When it comes to dealing with sensitive topics and radicalisation issues in the classroom, the direct involvement of the school principal is crucial.
- Do not stop to looking for alternative ways to manage. Always seek training in the prevention of the spread of radical ideologies at school for yourself and your school staff;
- Make sure that enough space is provided for teaching psychosocial competencies and democratic values in your school.
- Invest in long-term projects that focus on meaning-making and the learning path of active citizenship.
- Facilitate connections between the school and parents.
- Make your systems/methods sustainable, and be aware that heading a school also means preparing young generations to live in pluralistic societies.
- Make some rooms are available for teachers to work through topics in a cross-curricular way.
- Build a trusting relationship with your school staff and design a shared ethos with them.
- Establish robust partnerships with psychologists, social workers, police, and municipalities in a multi-agency approach to prevent radicalisation at school. This would be precious support for teachers.
- Invite external experts to analyse specificities of different sensitive issues endorsed in the classroom and insist on welcoming parents for different school initiatives in this regard.

Recommendations for Teachers

- Be close to pupils and ask: What kind of school environment can we cultivate for children that will enable them to express their views, grievances, and desires in a safe setting and with confidence?
- Talk with students, not about them! Provide a respectful learning environment.
- Build a relationship based on trust with your students;
- Develop your authority without being judgmental. Facilitate dialogue among students in the classroom, focusing on their future and how they want to live together in society.
- Engage with students in a way that relates to their experiences, perceptions, codes, and world views.

- Participate in conversations with students on controversial issues that concern them. Focus on commonalities rather than on differences through topics such as fears, anxiety, uncertainty, and life changes.
- Capacity building for discussing controversial issues: act as facilitators rather than experts on controversial topics in the classroom. Adopt an attitude that is open, interested, devoted, inquisitive , and critical questioning.
- Make the diversity of students in the classroom a subject for discussion.
- Topics such as democratic citizenship and human rights should be part of all conversations in the classroom regarding issues that prompt strong feelings and divide communities and society.
- Increase students' media literacy.
- Involve students in prevention initiatives.
- Be sure to always seek equal gender representation in classroom discussions.

Recommendations for Governments

- Consider education as a crucial and long-term investment.
- Foster human identity instead of religious identities.
- Become more aware of the real classroom issues. Invest in dialogue with schools to give appropriate answers to their actual needs.
- Restore the image of the state in those cases where social cohesion of citizens, welfare, and social services are perceived as weak or opposed to the real needs of youth.
- Restore the image of teachers in society and help them improve their skills through targeted training.
- Always place human rights and constitutional laws above all when it comes to speaking about freedom of religion and investing in human resources in this respect.
- Introduce philosophy and "life and society" subjects as part of all school curricula to foster democratic dialogue and improve students' critical thinking skills.
- Monitor private denominational schools and subsidiary educational structures, especially madrassas, in order to avoid the spread of anti-democratic and polarising religious extremist narratives.
- Invest in prevention tools for teachers.
- Promote the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights as a cornerstone for European citizenship and its use in school classrooms.