

05/09/2022

## CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN Small-scale expert meeting – The underlying iceberg of Islamist extremism  
3 May 2022, Berlin, Germany*

# The Underlying Iceberg of Islamist Extremism

## Context

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On 3 May 2022, a group of experts with experience in dealing with non-violent Islamist extremism met in Berlin to explore this sensitive topic and to develop first recommendations to support their practitioner colleagues.

Non-violent Islamist extremist actors often play an important role in the recruitment and radicalisation process of individuals into extremism and even extremist action, including violence. While most members of such movements do not engage in violence, many of these non-violent, overarching legalist movements have grown in Europe over decades and often encompass entire communities. As a result, many members do not necessarily make a conscious choice to become a member and did not follow an individual radicalisation pathway. Of course, not all of these community members have closed extremist mindsets. Yet, some movements have become very capable of attracting and maintaining the attention of young European Muslims by addressing themes and topics closely linked to their lived realities (e.g. discrimination, double identities) in an attempt to slowly draw them into an increasingly narrow and anti-democratic mindset.

In this context, practitioners are confronted with the substantial challenge of having to navigate between adequate prevention and countermeasures to extremist beliefs and mindsets contrary to pluralistic, democratic societal values, while simultaneously not infringing on legitimate religious action and expression, which should be protected.

All of this begs the question: How can and should such ideologies and movements be approached within the scope of prevention and countering of extremism? To tackle this question, RAN Practitioners took the unprecedented step of bringing experts from across Europe together to discuss non-stigmatising and non-marginalising approaches for dealing with non-violent Islamist extremism in Europe.

*\*The authors would like to stress non-violent expressions of extremist ideas and ideologies are common for every 'type' of extremism and not exclusive to forms of Islamist extremism. All types of ideas and ideologies that contradict and eventually counteract basic human rights and democratic values should be tackled within the scope of prevention and countering of extremism.*

This paper summarises the main conclusions following the in-depth group discussions during the small-scale expert meeting. The highlights of the discussion provide preliminary answers to the 'why' and 'how' when addressing non-violent Islamist extremism.

## A duty to act?

### Why P/CVE practitioners should tackle non-violent Islamist extremism

**Extremists as saviours:** Non-violent Islamist extremism, like any other extremism, is inherently opposed to values of freedom, equality and democracy. At the same time, organised non-violent Islamist extremist actors quite often portray themselves as a righteous vanguard of Muslims fighting against the oppression and victimisation of all Muslims in 'the West' or within their respective societies. While practitioners do not negate the existence of racism and bigotry against Muslim members of European societies, the aim of non-violent Islamist extremists is to 'prove' the narrative that European societies will never accept Muslims as equals, thereby fuelling polarisation and division. This aims to isolate Muslim communities, creating parallel societies in order to achieve their overarching aims which vary according to the specific ideology they adhere to (in the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir, for example, this would be the foundation of a global caliphate).

**No open mindset:** Especially adolescents growing up in or being drawn into a closed extremist context run a high risk of being prevented from developing an open mindset and from taking part in and shaping democratic societies. Additionally, beyond the potential harm to themselves, radicalised persons who are part of the non-violent Islamist extremist spectrum also try to restrict other persons' freedoms and possibilities of participation and personality development. This often concerns classmates and peer groups, but also close family members such as siblings, cousins, etc.

**No one's rights or freedom are infringed:** Practitioners and professionals working with young persons in the context of social and youth work, education, etc. have a duty to act to protect both those young persons who are already radicalised themselves and those who might become targets of proselytising or even recruitment efforts. It is part of their most basic task — often as a joint effort between different professional groups — to equip young people with the resources necessary to think critically and constructively and to ensure that no one's rights and freedoms are infringed upon. Such problematic behaviour may take the shape of: excluding or even actively discriminating against/insulting/bullying others due to other religious or ethnic (family) backgrounds or their sexual identity or orientation; justifications or even glorifications of discriminatory behaviours or even violence; and spreading anti-democratic hateful beliefs. If such behaviour is justified with (pseudo-) religious arguments/justifications, it should become a case to look into for practitioners in the field of prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE).

**Train a specific skill set:** This last part is also true for practitioners who are not experts in the context of P/CVE, for example, teachers who are working with young persons, one of whom might one day begin acting adversarially in the classroom. How can such teachers act safely within their purview to protect the rest of the class, as well as this particular student and themselves, while also ensuring that they are not acting in a stigmatising and harmful way? This type of decision-making, responsibility and action competence requires a specific skill set that not all professionals have been trained in. Therefore, increased training efforts for 'regular' practitioners to identify and, especially, constructively and non-discriminatingly tackle non-violent Islamist extremism may be necessary.

**Examples of problematic behaviour:** Below are some examples of problematic behaviour warranting professional attention in the context of non-violent Islamist extremism. If one or more of these can be observed, it may be time to act (always in accordance with the relevant context factors and in line with the do-no-harm principle):

- Calls for segregation from the out-group, a.k.a. the community of non-believers (as designated by extremists): this attempts to limit an individual's possibilities of participating freely in whichever part of society they would like to. Often this may take the form of children/young persons being prohibited from participating in certain (leisure) activities with members of the out-group (e.g. go on school trips, become members of sports clubs, go swimming with friends). Sometimes, young persons on a radicalisation pathway

may also attempt to actively hinder other persons from participating in such activities. It may also lead to active discrimination/insulting/bullying of others.

- Negative social control may be applied through organised external actors (e.g. specific faith organisations, influential community actors) but can also be exerted by peers. Manifestations of this can vary, but one common example is children/young persons repeating phrases, justifications and arguments without seeming to fully understand or support them: "Person X said that we should not do this ..."; "Person Y said that as a true Muslim, you are not allowed to ..."
- Religion being used as a justification for segregation/limitation/discrimination: whenever supposed religious rules or laws are (ab)used as justifications to stop a person from doing something (e.g. playing sports, watching movies), existing in a specific way (e.g. by being lesbian, gay, queer, non-religious) or wanting something based on one's own needs, caution is warranted.

**Be smart:** At the same time, practitioners also need to be careful not to overreact and thereby create unintended negative consequences, such as additional feelings of discrimination, stigmatisation or non-belonging. To avoid overreactions, it is advisable to maintain (informal) partnerships or a close network with P/CVE specialists who can consult on specific and uncertain cases before any actions are taken. In any case: do not call the police on a young person who has voiced a problematic opinion (and nothing more than that). Such confrontations rarely lead to a positive outcome.

## How can and should practitioners tackle this problem?

Based on their own practical experience, the following insights as to how practitioners can approach non-violent Islamist extremism in their work were collected.

"We are more equal than we are different"

**Expanding knowledge:** Practitioners need increased knowledge on non-violent Islamist extremism to understand the actor landscape, relevant events and developments that are relevant to their audience (e.g. elections in a specific country, conflicts) and the real risk of radicalisation and its consequences for (young) people and their surrounding social network (see, for example, the previous section on 'Why?'). Practitioners need to ask themselves the following questions:

- "Who is shaping the communities' narratives on the local level and who is backing this?"
- "How might this affect my practice and interaction with my target group (e.g. in the classroom)?"

Finding the answers to these questions will help practitioners identify and thematise topics that are of relevance to their target audience early on, thereby preventing Islamist extremist actors from filling in the gap. Not all topics are related to politics and crises though. Often it is everyday topics (also related to gender, sexuality, identity) most relevant to young audiences which are taken up by Islamists, while being ignored by professionals. However, knowledge development and management are not one-time processes, but require continuous time and resources for requirements such as monitoring activities. As a result, policymakers should create a framework in which specific types of knowledge are created and disseminated to practitioners without increasing their burden too much.

**Raising awareness among decision-makers:** While the practitioners' knowledge base is key, the best knowledge is no use when the system itself does not allow for appropriate and constructive application due to a lack of awareness among relevant decision-makers. In most instances, it is not first-line practitioners or even P/CVE specialists who are in charge of shaping the general approach towards this topic. Therefore, in addition to training and equipping practitioners, further measures need to be taken to empower decision-makers (e.g. school principals,

local officials) to understand the underlying issues and to be competent to establish/discuss where the real problem lies before jumping to conclusions and potentially harmful actions and action policies.

**Starting a conversation, but not a lecture — and staying vigilant:** If the aim is to establish direct dialogue with Islamist extremist actors/organisations, select a focus topic that does not rely on the extremism label. This may include topics such as prevention of discrimination and its effects, negative social control and societal participation. The extremism label will likely act as a deterrent rather than appear inviting, regardless of whether the actor is generally open to dialogue or more opposed to it. In general, it is necessary to create an atmosphere of equality to avoid the feeling that the dialogue partner is being talked down to, instead of talking with them. This may be achieved by choosing a neutral venue, but also by respectfully and reciprocally visiting each other's familiar locations (e.g. a community centre, the local authority's office) once a first level of trust has been established. At the same time, all actors must be careful not to legitimise highly problematic actors in an attempt to begin a dialogue and by providing them with too much attention: For example, officially inviting the leader of a non-violent Islamist extremist organisation or mosque, who is engaging in recruitment efforts, to have a meeting with the mayor. Such efforts provide a misguided sense of authority to others, which in turn might actually fuel the actor's negative influence and reach.

**Reinforce importance and explain the value of an open democratic society more often:** One may assume that practitioners are fully aware of the value of an open democratic society — a society where people are treated as equals, with room for diversity and differences and freedom of expression and no aim to infringe on other people's rights to be whomever and however they wish to be as long as they adhere to the laws. In most countries, teaching about an open democratic society is part of the standard educational curriculum in primary and secondary school. However, we might need to explain and share this belief with younger generations more often and in smarter ways. Why is this something to strive for, what is in it for its citizens, what are the so-called democratic values? More importantly, find examples of why it is important but also examples of where in our societies this sometimes seems to go wrong. Give examples and have discussions about what an open democratic society means for its citizens. In most countries, teaching about an open democratic society is a part of the education curriculum. Especially in situations where non-violent extremist groups are present in the context of part of the younger generation, democratic values should be discussed more intensely and more in depth either during school hours or via youth work. This should be done in an attractive and understandable way which is appropriate to age and circumstance. An example of one such method, the CCA-Method, is described at the end of this paper. Other examples are the [Democracy Factory](#), [Democratic Unity](#), [Never Again Association](#) and [Living with Controversy](#).

“Deploy a ‘jiu-jitsu prevention approach’ by outsmarting Islamist extremist actors and not falling for their provocations”

**Do not fall into traps and for provocations:** Non-violent Islamist extremists are very effective in shaping narratives around victimhood, stigmatisation, etc. Practitioners should always be aware of this and be mindful of potential provocations that are purely designed to illicit a negative overreaction, be it from the practitioners themselves or on the overarching level from state authorities, politicians, etc. One prominent example was the #NichtOhneMeinKopftuch (‘Not without my headscarf’) campaign by Islamists in Germany, essentially weaponising identity struggles and real-life experiences of Muslim women in Germany and counting on a conservative and far-right backlash to prove their point that Muslims would never be accepted by German mainstream society <sup>(1)</sup>.

**Be respectful, compassionate and strict at the same time:** Prevention efforts should always start slowly and carefully to ensure that the audience will not be overwhelmed. Practitioners need to find a constructive balance of relationship and trust building, which may often be facilitated by using creative approaches, such as art projects, especially with younger audiences and on the primary and secondary prevention levels. At the same time, they

1 For more information see: <https://www.hass-im-netz.info/themen/artikel/praxisinfo-nichtohneineinkopftuch.html> (in German).

need to draw very clear boundaries of what is acceptable and what they will not tolerate. This does not mean that practitioners should forbid their audience or clients to speak openly and freely. However, the audience needs to be aware that problematic behaviour and statements will be addressed and discussed critically (but without overreaction). Thematising problematic but non-violent world views is to walk a tightrope: professionals need to do so in the spirit of open and critical debate and discussion, encouraging youngsters to explore and develop their own critical thinking skills, rather than doing so in a prohibitive manner that might be interpreted as 'thought policing'. Generally, practitioners should foster an atmosphere of accessibility and visibility, allowing their audience to reach out to them whenever they feel they need or want to and without having to fear repercussions.

**Reinforcing the “We” narrative:** When dealing with divisive narratives, aiming to segregate different parts of society and to pit them against each other, a focus needs to be placed on reinforcing commonalities instead of differences. Especially young people tend to be similar in their struggles to develop their own identity, defining and voicing their needs, etc. Turning towards Islamist extremist ideas may well be an expression of this struggle, while other teenagers may turn to other types of identity formation processes. While maintaining clear borders of what is acceptable and what is not, practitioners can show struggling youths that other peers are dealing with very similar issues and problems, highlighting that they are not, in fact, very different from one another.

- An integral part of emphasising the “WE” narrative is to actively avoid a disproportional focus on Islamist extremism in societies in which other radical and even extremist phenomena are equally present. The past has shown that European societies, and even trained practitioners, have tended to come down hard on anything that could potentially be related to Islamist extremism while, for example, right-wing extremist narratives or statements were waived off as relatively harmless expressions of ‘adolescent rebellion’ or carelessness<sup>(2)</sup>. Such an approach fuels further polarisation and plays into the hands of extremists from all sides. Therefore, practitioners need to ensure a zero tolerance policy for any kind of exclusion or discriminatory narratives.
- Additionally, practitioners should support young persons in positive expressions of activism and even protest — this too is a part of active and positive participation within society, and can create experiences of belonging and being taken seriously.
- Lastly, religion and lived religion can be constructive parts of a pluralistic society. Zero tolerance towards exclusion and divisiveness does not mean zero tolerance towards respectful religious expression.

2 See for example, Baaken, T., Korn, K., Ruf, M., & Walkenhorst, D. (2020). Dissecting deradicalization: Challenges for theory and practice in Germany. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 14(2), Article 3808. p. 10. <https://www.ijcv.org/index.php/ijcv/article/view/3808/3867>

## Relevant practice

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An example of a successful method to address un-democratic narratives is the [CCA-Method](#). It is a co-developed strategic communication methodology used in situations where young people are influenced by narratives that are potential threats to our shared democratic values.

The following three narratives are used consecutively:

- **Connective Narrative** — a story with the focus on shared values, used when connecting with students and pupils for the first time. This is reflected in the attention to a strong sense of belonging through a connective school climate and shared values. Teachers are trained to develop their connective communication skills to students through training sessions based on the Bateson pyramid and a democratic school ethos (based on: RAN Collection – [Identity & Communication](#)).
- **Counter Narrative** — to counter a substantive problematic (radical) standpoint via a contextual and/or historical analysis based on Socratic methodology.
- **Alternative Narrative** — to take away the pressure that might come up when implementing counternarratives as young people might feel singled out and/or targeted by the arguments brought forth. It shifts the focus away to a completely different case that shows how young people can address their grievances in alternative ways. Alternative pathways are provided by:
  - strong participation of students themselves in student councils, civic activities and art projects at school (see also RAN Collection – Athena-syntax and <https://athenasyntax.org>);
  - alternative historical, political, economic and/or religious readings on the subject at hand by experts.

This strategy was co-developed by the GO! Atheneum of Antwerp and Ceapire. For more information please refer to the [RAN Collection of inspiring practices](#).

## Necessary follow-up within RAN Practitioners

Since non-violent radical and extremist expressions remain a sensitive topic to tackle within the scope of P/CVE, participants further discussed formats to continue this debate within RAN Practitioners.

- **Involving country experts to gain a broader understanding:** RAN should collect additional practical insights into approaches towards non-violent extremism by surveying/involving representatives from different Member States and countries (also regarding other types of extremism).
- **Define and discuss specific sub-issues and challenges:** Since discussions on this topic tend to remain broad and sometimes superficial, even more practical, hands-on discussions should be conducted within small-group exchange formats to tackle specific smaller issues and challenges.
- **Involving Muslims and persons with Muslim heritage:** Muslims and persons living within Muslim heritage communities are most affected by Islamist extremism — violent or otherwise. It is of crucial importance to further include individuals and community representatives with experience concerning this topic in future discussions. Importantly, involve persons with Muslim backgrounds and other people directly affected by non-violent Islamist extremism in future conversations and discussions.

Further ideas/topics for future RAN Practitioner meeting formats:

- **Peer-reviewing sessions:** In a closed format, a small number of expert practitioners could critically but constructively discuss and further develop approaches presented by their colleagues.
- **Negative social control:** This is an overarching topic relevant beyond the scope of Islamist extremism that has not yet been discussed to a greater extent within RAN Practitioners. It may also allow a non-stigmatising format of discussion on different types of non-violent extremism.

## Further reading

RAN Specialised Paper: [Extremists' Targeting of Young Women on Social Media and Lessons for P/CVE](#)

RAN Specialised Paper: [Manifesto for Education 2nd Edition, 2021](#)

RAN LOCAL: [The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism](#), 25-26 November 2021

RAN Y&E: [Working with Community Figures both Inside and Outside Schools](#), 5-6 October 2021

RAN Y&E and RAN LOCAL: [Dealing with the Co-existence of Formal and Non-formal Education](#), 4-5 November 2020

RAN EDU: [Free speech, extremism and the prevention of radicalisation in higher education](#), 8-9 February 2018