

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT: AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO TACKLE RADICALISATION

Diverse pathways to extremism exist, and complex patterns of grievances unique to each individual make identifying and combatting radicalisation difficult. Amongst these grievances, unemployment and poverty are significant. The solution to radicalisation needs to look beyond government programmes alone and also involve building relationships with those at risk, including through business and faith communities, argues Brian Grim.

The January 2015 attacks in Paris, carried out by those with a reported link to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, reaffirmed an urgent question. If policing European streets and co-ordinating an international response to Islamist extremism is not enough to stem the tide of radicalisation, what more should be done? The answer involves understanding two things: the socio-economic context of the advance of Islamist extremists, especially the horrific advance of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and the diverse social and personal pathways to radicalisation.¹

According to a Pew Research survey in 2013,² in the years running up to the ISIS advance, the Iraqi public's chief concern was unemployment. Less than half of those surveyed in Iraq considered conflict between religious groups to be a very large problem. But by contrast, three-quarters of those surveyed considered unemployment to be a "very large problem" for the country. Indeed, the lack of jobs arguably softened the ground for ISIS's sudden advance.

Although research indicates that a poor economy does not cause violent extremism, it contributes to the conditions that extremists can exploit.³ Indeed, extremists know how to use poverty and wealth for their benefit. They

recruit suicide bombers from the ranks of the poor and they look to the wealthy for cash because, as observed in the Yale Review of International Studies, the rich "would rather donate their money than their sons to the cause."⁴

More than that, extremists think strategically about business and the economy. The January attacks in Paris targeted two local businesses connected with much bigger industries: Hyper Cacher, the multi-billion dollar Kosher food industry, and Charlie Hebdo, the multi-trillion dollar media industry. On a larger scale, the 9/11 al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre in New York – soaring symbols of development and progress – was not a random choice. In 2004, Osama bin Laden said in a taped speech, "We are continuing this policy in bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy. Every dollar of al-Qaeda defeated a million dollars [spent by the US], including the loss of a huge number of jobs."⁵

Some studies suggest that radical extremism can play a role during times of global economic downturn.⁶ Whether or not this is the case, the foreign policy focus of many of the world's leading economies has without a doubt been on war and peace rather than business.

If violent extremists attack businesses and take advantage of a bad economy to sow seeds of religious discord and violence, better business must be part of the response to radical extremism. This requires an understanding that the radicalisation process is not only social but also deeply personal.

The “pathway by which one person is radicalised can have a completely different effect on someone else”, observes Raffaello Pantucci of London’s RUSI think tank.⁷ A similar conclusion was reached by the Paris-based Centre of Prevention of Sectarian Derivatives linked to Islam (CPDSI), which finds that contemporary extremist discourse appeals to those from any background, not just those who are considered socially ‘at risk’.⁸ However, improving the lives and futures of those living on the edge or fringes of society will be beneficial. Being on the margins breeds feelings of powerlessness and isolation – the very conditions that can make people most susceptible to proposals to find power through violence.

Reflecting the views of many, Pope Francis said that “it is urgent that governments throughout the world commit themselves to developing an international framework capable of promoting a market of high impact investments, and thus to combating an economy which excludes and discards.”¹⁰ Similarly, British Prime Minister David Cameron argues, “Social investment can be a great force for social change on the planet. It can help us to build bigger and stronger societies. That power is in our hands. And together we will use it to build a better future for ourselves, for our children and for generations to come.”

These are grand statements by world

leaders. In implementing them we often overlook the way in which businesses and faith volunteers can build relationships with those at risk of radicalisation.

The instrumental link between social impact investing and countering radicalisation is person-to-person contact. Social investment that has impact requires personal and business relationships characterised by love and respect, not hate and intolerance. Accordingly, the need is for business people in partnership with faith volunteers to build personal relationships with those at risk of radicalisation. The involvement of interfaith teams (including humanists) is a critical component because countering religious hate can most effectively be done with “love of neighbour” as exemplified in the Good Samaritan (a foreigner with a foreign faith).

Here, neighbourly love is not an emotion but a practical commitment to help mentor those in need with individualised resources that help them provide for their own needs as well as those of their families and extended families. These toolkits, such as those being created at the moment by my Religious Freedom & Business Foundation together with St. Mary’s University, Twickenham for our Empowerment+ initiative,¹¹ need to relate across faith traditions, being practical as much for Muslims as Mormons, for Humanists and Agnostics as Hindus and Catholics. They should have resources that can be customised as needed to address themes related to a balanced life: education, health, employment, productivity and stewardship, household finances, and spiritual strength.¹²

Building a network of mentors in this way will also help to identify

sustainable investments that promote integration and economic development in communities where people at risk of radicalisation live. Such projects should adhere to several important criteria: a high probability of a successful business venture; applicability of the business model to other situations; representation of different faith traditions; and promoting productive collaboration between religious minorities and other segments of society.

As the Rand Corporation note,

The most successful programmes attend to a radical's emotional well-being by offering counselling and helping the ex-militant locate a supportive social network; address practical factors by, for example, providing training and a job; and work to moderate the radical's beliefs by challenging extremist Islamism. Moreover, to facilitate the reintegration of ex-radicals into society, de-radicalisation programmes should continue to support and monitor those who have reformed.¹³

Integration and empowerment can help those at risk of radicalisation to follow a different course, which is why the involvement of business is so critical. By mixing good information and support structures through business mentoring, it is possible to catalyse sustainable businesses that increase integration and resilience in communities where there is a high risk of radicalisation through personal interaction and the building of productive relationships.¹⁴

There are clear policy implications

for tackling radicalisation by building relationships with those at risk through business and faith communities. First, governments should help fund, and collaborate with, carefully designed pilot programmes in key cities. Good pilots are very important because they test and establish the most effective way to run initiatives in various settings with multiple stakeholders. Well designed pilots with proper government support can win over sceptics and energise scores, perhaps thousands of volunteers.

Second, because the pathways into radicalisation are diverse, community-based initiatives, such as Empowerment+, should not be conceptualised as programmes that solely intervene when someone is thought to be on the verge of anti-social, criminal or violent behaviour. Rather, they should be conceptualised and branded as social cohesion and enterprise initiatives. They should be aimed at primary prevention through the sort of practical integration and empowerment that can help those experiencing a wide range of socio-economic risks to build resilience to radicalisation.

Third, the government can serve as a convening platform to invite businesses to join with faith groups in a programme of dialogue and exchange. In the case of Empowerment+, this would be done through community advisory committees. Businesses should advise and help communities through local mentors – and the reach of faith communities makes them prime candidates as mentors – to develop sustainable initiatives and strategies for developing welfare support and business mentoring. In this way local businesses can receive support and advice and help to improve the local economy.

In turn, businesses, by working with local volunteers from faith communities, would establish better contacts, insights and connections with communities, with new business opportunities possibly opening up. Employees can gain new experience by working with local communities and through voluntary service. Moreover, businesses can improve their corporate social responsibility record by providing opportunities through, and working with, initiatives for those on the margins of society, or by providing social impact investment funds for education,

vocational training and community welfare projects.

When love of neighbour is accompanied by empowering social investment, integration and interfaith appreciation result. In the end, all this is good for business because, as the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby appositely notes, good business is about good relationships.¹⁵ This applies to neighbourhoods in cities and communities throughout Europe, as well as suffering populations in northern Iraq.

Endnotes

1. See B.J. Grim, *Four ways businesses can help to build world peace*, World Economic Forum, 9 October 2014 [<https://agenda.weforum.org/2014/10/businesses-help-build-peace/>]; and Centre on Religion & Geopolitics, *New Trends in Youth Radicalisation*, 9 December 2014, [<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/reports-analysis/report/new-trends-youth-radicalisation>].
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12. See <http://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/groups-and-toolkit> for more information.
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14. See <http://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/integrative-business> for more information.
15. J. Welby, Speech to the *Blueprint for Better Business* conference, 24 October 2013, [<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5167/archbishops-speech-to-the-blueprint-for-better-business-conference>].



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