

# BEYOND SIGNPOSTING. NEW APPROACH TO WORKING WITH FAMILIES OF RADICALISED YOUTH AND COOPERATING WITH NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

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Expanding instability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, most importantly Syria (where the war is half-way through its sixth year of conflict) and parts of Iraq, continues to pose significant security challenges to international security forces. An estimated 27,000-31,000 people from at least 86 countries left their states to join groups such as Daesh (also known as Islamic State) or al-Qaeda affiliates (e.g. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) in these two countries (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2017). While the majority of them came from the Middle East and former Soviet republics, over 6,000 are believed to have originated from Western Europe and North America (Barrett, 2017).

As the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) estimates, from January 2011 to October 2015 between 3,922 and 4,294 of them were nationals of one of the European Union countries (van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016); about 129 from the United States of America (Bergen, Sterman, Ford, & Sims, 2017) and (as of March 2016) roughly 180 were believed to hold Canadian citizenship (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2017). According to ICCT, out of those hailing from the European Union, 14% were confirmed dead, 30% are believed to have returned and 47% remain abroad (as of 2016, the whereabouts of 9% remain unknown). The Soufan Group, in turn, estimates the number of returnees at “at least” 5,600 persons from the 33 countries covered by their report published in October 2017 plus “unknown numbers from other countries” (Barrett, 2017).

Countries are therefore facing a double challenge of preventing people (especially youth, see e.g. el-Said & Barrett, 2017) from getting radicalised and leaving to fight for Daesh and its affiliates and adequately dealing with the returnees through de-radicalisation programmes, although in the face of Daesh’s demise it is undeniably the latter issue that is currently more pressing.

Indeed, a number of organisations and state-run programmes and initiatives have been established during the past decade. Notably, in September 2011 the European

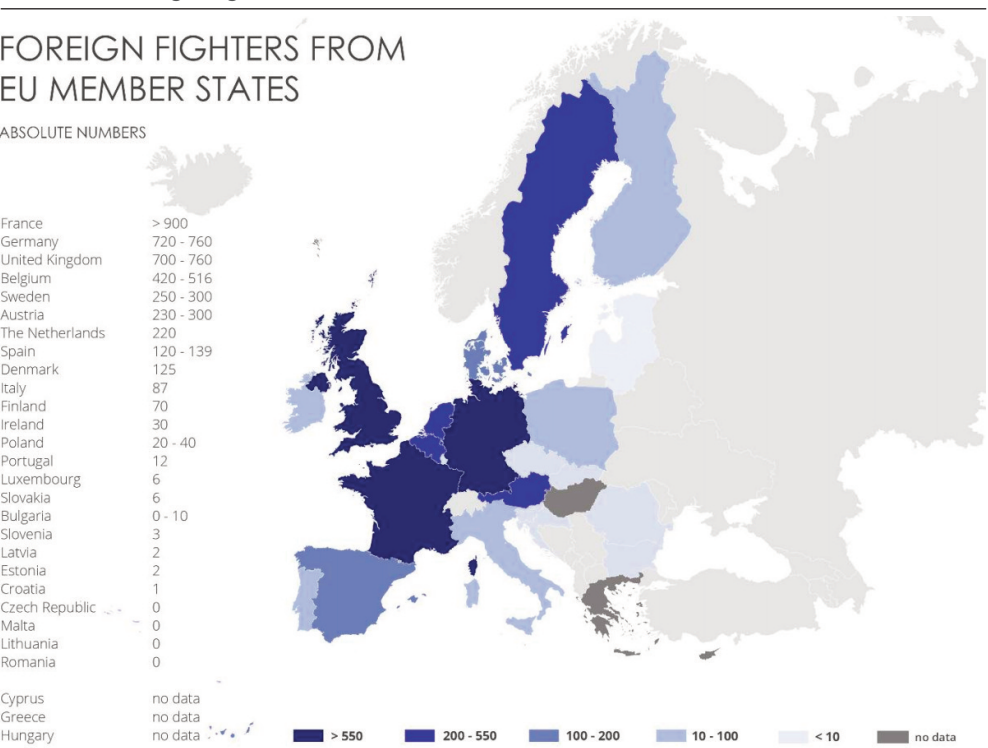
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Commission inaugurated the creation of a network of practitioners, politicians and academics (the Radicalisation Awareness Network [RAN]) and the United Nations Security Council called for the formation of reintegration programmes for foreign fighters returning from Syria and Iraq (Resolution 2178); in general “in the past few years de-radicalisation and counter-extremism programmes have become a firm feature of a number of national and international counter-terrorism strategies” (Koehler, 2017).

At the same time, numerous non-governmental (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) commenced or intensified their efforts to complement and supplement the work carried out by the government-affiliated entities.

Figure 1. Foreign Fighters from EU Member States



Source: van Ginkel, B. & Entenmann, E. (Eds.), 2016, p. 50.

Rationale and Methodology

Against this background, this policy brief examines experiences of two CBOs offering advice and support to relatives and friends of young people affected by radicalisation: the UK-based *Families for Life* (<http://www.familiesforlife.org.uk/>) and the Canadian chapter (<http://www.hayatcanada.com/>) of the *Hayat* network. Both organisations belong to the *Mothers for Life network* (<http://www.mothersforlife.org/en/network>) and were founded by mothers who lost their sons to radical Islam; *Hayat* Canada was established

by Christianne Boudreau, whose son died in Syria as one of the Daesh (or so-called Islamic State) soldiers in January 2014. Son of the *Families for Life* founder, Nicola Benyahia, met the same fate in November 2015. The choice of these two particular chapters of *Mothers for Life* was dictated by practical reasons, namely the possibility of conducting interviews with their founders. More broadly, the *Mothers for Life* network was selected due to it being one of the biggest and most widespread CBOs dealing with the issue of radicalisation and de-radicalisation in the world.

The analysis presented below is based on interviews conducted with Nicola Benyahia of *Families for Life*, and Christianne Boudreau and Alexandra Bain of *Hayat Canada*.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, the paper presents the perspective of the two organisations; since the relevant national and local authorities were not consulted for this brief study, the paper has no pretence of being an in-depth and exhaustive discussion of the issue at hand and should not be treated as such. Instead, it should be seen as a voice in the wider discussion, offering a point of view of community-based organisations.

The two organisations were chosen as an example of a grassroots approach to both prevention of radicalisation and de-radicalisation. Offering counselling and training to families and peers who suspect their loved one(s) might be showing signs of radicalisation, as well as guidelines on dealing with the aftermath of radicalisation, their work is based on the assumption that working with communities and families of persons at risk of radicalisation is equally important as working with these persons themselves.

This belief has its basis in a broad family of studies pointing to the crucial importance of families in the de-radicalisation processes (e.g. Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009). In fact, one study showed that in almost two thirds (63.9%) of investigated cases, “family and friends were aware of the individual's intent to engage in terrorism-related activities because the offender verbally told them” (Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014, p. 429). This surprisingly high percentage has been confirmed in a number of other studies (e.g. Sageman, 2004; Bakker, 2006), all of which point to the conclusion that the social environment of radicalised individuals is crucial in counter- and de-radicalisation.

### Case Studies

Although both organisations under scrutiny are still relatively young, the experiences gained thus far from their work with a number of individuals, families and communities, as well as authorities from the United Kingdom, Canada and beyond, already allow for preparing an initial list of lessons learned and drafting recommendations that will hopefully be useful for (de)radicalisation scholars and practitioners alike.

<sup>1</sup> Whom I would like to thank again for kindly agreeing to talk to me and sharing their experiences and insights.

### *Building Trust*

Gaining and maintaining the trust of families who suspect their loved one(s) is becoming or has already become radicalised is one of the biggest challenges in the work of community organisations such as *Families for Life* and Hayat Canada. Weary of being branded “a terrorist family” and ostracised from the community, the families need a safe space where they can talk with sympathetic professionals, without necessarily immediately triggering a police investigation and while remaining anonymous. Indeed, the first contact with *Families for Life* was in many cases first initiated (and sometimes carried on) via email, a less personal form than a phone call. Equally important was an opportunity to actually *discuss* issues of concern and gain advice about how to proceed, as opposed to being sent back home should one not tick all the boxes on the “radicalisation checklist”.

At the same time, crucial for the success of the community-based organisations' work is building a relationship based on trust with the national and local authorities. In the absence of clear rules of cooperation, CBOs may feel their efforts are not appreciated and/or treated seriously. More alarmingly, in the process of working with radicalised persons and their families they tend to be completely overlooked by the authorities.

While these two goals – gaining the trust of the authorities as well as families and communities – may seem contradictory, in reality they can only truly be achieved if pursued simultaneously. As underlined by Dr Alexandra Bain from *Hayat Canada*, if relations between CBOs and authorities are normalised and built into legal frameworks, with everybody's roles clearly defined, all sides to the process would benefit. Firstly, authorities would count on CBOs in determining which cases of radicalisation referred to them are serious enough to be forwarded for further investigation. Families, on the other hand, would have a guarantee that in less serious cases the problem would be dealt with by the CBOs and a potentially disproportionate reaction on the part of government agencies would be avoided. This would reduce their fears of authorities overreacting to reported cases, and thus increase their willingness and incentives to report their suspicions early on. At the same time, the families would have a guarantee that even should their case turn out to be serious enough to be taken on by the authorities, CBOs would provide them with professional legal and psychological help throughout the investigation process.

### *De-sensationalisation*

Closely related to trust issues is the already mentioned fear of being turned into a national and/or local sensation, which has been flagged as a major issue preventing families from approaching authorities and/or CBOs. This fear is fuelled by sensational images propagated both in the traditional and social media. Added to that is the fact that radicalisation (and terrorism) is commonly associated solely with Islam to the exclusion of other radical movements such as far right or far left ones, or various cults.

Ms Benyahia therefore underlined the importance of informing communities about the nature of the potential police intervention and humanising the experience of families and friends of the radicalised person. Efforts towards de-sensationalisation of radicalisation and terrorism as well as towards targeting Islamophobia are very much needed. A huge role is to be played by the media, which have a significant influence on public perceptions and moods.

#### *Sustainability Challenge*

Related to the problems with gaining trust outlined above is the sustainability issue. Currently, both organisations are run by volunteers and do not have regular sources of income to fund their activities. Ideas on how to resolve this situation, however, vary between the UK-based *Families for Life* and Canadian-based *Hayat*. While the founder of the former underlined that in order to remain trustworthy in the eyes of the potential clients, the organisation needs to stay independent of the government (about which many communities at risk of radicalisation are highly sceptical), representatives of *Hayat* expressed the belief that government funding is not only welcome but is in fact indispensable. *Hayat*<sup>2</sup> would like their employees, currently working on a voluntary basis, included on the government payroll alongside cultural mediators, counsellors and mental health professionals, making them an official part of the prevention, intervention and de-radicalisation processes.

#### *Comprehensive Approach*

Being included in the official proceedings would have an additional benefit of allowing CBOs to assist families and communities at every stage of the process. It is of crucial importance to engage with families so that they are not treated singularly as sources of information and feel victimised by the authorities during the investigation. Particularly vulnerable are siblings of the radicalised person, who more often than not are silent victims of the situation and – unless provided with professional counselling – are themselves at high risk of radicalisation (as one of the interviewees put it, radicalisation “is like a virus”).

Equally important is helping families to maintain a relationship with a radicalised person even after they would have gone to fight in a foreign country. According to Dr Bain, it is essential that young people continue thinking that their families might take them back, in which case, should they manage to return to their country of origin, it could be infinitely easier to commence the de-radicalisation process, as well as to gain valuable insights into the functioning of terrorist organisations.

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<sup>2</sup> As is, for example, a case in Germany, where the local chapter of *Hayat* is financed by the Federal Office for Immigration and Refugee Affairs, <http://hayat-deutschland.de/english/>.

Finally, CBOs recommend working not only with families but also with communities; to quote Dr Bain again, “it took a community to radicalise a person so it will take a community to bring them back.”

While these recommendations are fairly universal, the kaleidoscope of root causes of extremism is wide, including (but not limited to) various social, political and ideological factors on macro and micro levels, and “radicalisation mechanisms are a product of interplay between push- and pull-factors within individuals” (RAN Centre of Excellence, 2016; Dzhekova, et al., 2016). In what follows, each individual case and each “village” is different and one-for-all solutions, especially when it comes to prevention, are not always effective. However, certain root causes may be common to a given community, region or country, depending on its history, socioeconomic and political environment, and cultural and religious background.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The relationship between community-based organisations and authorities is a demanding one. However, the success or lack thereof in counter- and de-radicalisation efforts is contingent on its strength. Neither side is able to comprehensively fulfil its mission without cooperation with the other. However time-consuming and strenuous the process of normalising mutual relations and establishing effective and efficient ways of cooperation may be, it is crucial to meet the end goal of preventing radicalisation among young persons and de-radicalise those who have already lost their way. For their work to bring best results, CBOs should be supported by their local and national governments and services, as well as the EU-level institutions. Likewise, CBOs need to support and share their knowledge and experiences with relevant authorities.

Key recommendations<sup>3</sup> drafted drawing on experiences of *Families for Life* and *Hayat* Canada that can hopefully make this process easier and smoother are thus as follows:

- Cooperation between community-based organisations and authorities needs to be normalised, legalised and forged in a clear, unambiguous way.
- Prevention is more effective than criminalisation; more funds and efforts should be invested in dealing with underlying issues of radicalisation. Providing widely-available and affordable mental health services is one way of doing this.
- Timing is crucial: both CBOs and governments need to find a balance between overreacting and not reacting until it is too late. Cutting red-tape and introducing fast-

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed and exhaustive recommendations for practitioners, policy-makers and academics, see e.g. Koehler, D. (2017), Handbook for Structural Quality Standards in Deradicalization Work.

pace procedures are also needed. Using their experiences, CBOs could provide governments with recommendations on how to streamline their work.

- Procedures must be clearly outlined yet at the same time flexible enough in order to address each case as effectively and efficiently as possible. Here again, CBOs can support the authorities providing recommendations and suggestions based on their real-life experiences.
- The problem of radicalisation is unlikely to disappear any time soon – to quote Christianne Boudreau, “beyond what we could even count” – and countries will have to deal with returning foreign fighters (as well as their families, including offspring) for years to come. CBOs should therefore work closely with governments and EU institutions to develop long-term prevention and de-radicalisation strategies.
- CBOs should work with journalists (organising workshops and information campaigns), providing them with background knowledge on radicalisation processes and expertise on how to cover stories of radicalisation in an informative and de-sensationalised way.
- Likewise, they should also cooperate with other stakeholders (such as governmental and non-governmental organisations, universities or EU institutions) on social campaigns and educational programmes targeted at both prevention and de-sensationalisation of radicalisation.
- CBOs should campaign for measures to allow de-radicalised persons to be incorporated into the prevention and de-radicalisation processes; while currently former terrorists are forbidden to talk about their past in public, their experiences are extremely valuable in discouraging persons who are at risk of radicalisation from following their steps.



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