

On Building Resilience to Those Affected by Radicalisation in MENA

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By Dr. Ahmad Al-Dubayan

Director General of the Islamic Cultural Centre, London

It is essential to clarify at the outset that violence has never been an ideological element of any of major or mainstream Islamic Schools of thought. Violence has commonly been used as a means to bring about change in society. Alternatively, violence was a reaction of some groups when their lives or their faith was under attack.

The concept of aggression in Islam is strictly forbidden by the Quran; indeed permission to engage in warfare is conditional. It serves to deter others who initiate direct aggressive attacks. Warfare in Islam is strictly defensive. Further, the rules of engagement with an enemy on the attack are clearly defined, so that for example the defensive action cannot involve killing women and children or destroying property, such as crops.

Against this background, much confusion is generated by the media on the use of terms such as “Islamic Terror”, “Islamic Violence” or “Fundamentalism”. This use of language generates social and negative reactions in Islamic and Middle Eastern societies and individuals (in addition to Non-MENA Islamic societies), and creates misunderstandings. However, Radicalisation, as we see it today, is a relatively new phenomenon.

Many studies concentrated on education as the only root of the problem, relying on a number of different sources and studies in this regard. While Education in the Middle East is a constantly expanding and developing sector, benefitting from large public spending, it still suffers from poor planning and underachievement in relation to its recipients. The problems associated with education in the Middle East, are seen across a number of spheres, including but not limited to, the economy, the labour market and society as a whole.

In comparison to this educational setback, one notes that some of those who join radical groups in Europe and Middle Eastern countries were highly educated, working in highly skilled professions, or are sometimes graduates from leading universities. There is a strong case that education or the lack of it is not so much a corner stone of the radicalisation problem, but one possible element of many that can lead to the radicalisation phenomenon. Elements and factors contributing to the rise of radicalisation include economic, social, political and physiological elements, amongst other matters.

Countries in the MENA region suffer from various problems which can lead to radicalisation. Political problems have additionally aggravated social exclusion, corruption, poverty, unemployment, the absence of political legitimacy, failure of development, along with the lack of the value of citizenship.

Reactions in MENA governments and policies have mostly been to exaggerate and to emphasise the need for precautionary security systems and measures, which are solely responsive, rather than a cure for the underlining cases and causes. To deal with perceived threats to a state or country, the response sometimes has been to deal with problems in a manner that is outside the rule of law,

leading to the aggravation of some of the aforementioned factors and elements contributing to radicalisation, and possible social polarisation.

On the other hand, one sees initiatives in many of these countries, to fight such corruption and associated problems, and improve the situation through real sustainable thought out plans. The new generation (aged between 15 and 35) are desperate, given the situation they find themselves in. Blame is still apportioned directly against the political elite, seeing no solution from within the political system.

In light of this, it is not unusual to see a phenomenon of uncertain identity of this generation which leads to a violent reaction against the reality in which they live. The solutions they have as they see them, are either to cross the sea to Europe (in death boats) or to opt for violence to try and change their situation. Members of this generation can sometimes find themselves more connected to the glorious past, rather than the realities of the present in MENA.

It is also important to take note of some of the literature that puts forward a theory of conspiracy in which the West is actively engaged in destroying MENA, for economic and ideological reasons. Corruption and political shortcomings, in this literature, are used by the West to control the MENA region, meddle in its affairs and keep it under a constant state of stress in its own problems.

This has been one of the reasons fuelling the rise of many radical groups such as Al-Qaeda. The West is targeted by Al-Qaeda, not because Islam as a faith is against the West, but rather because the West is portrayed as the puppet master.

An important distinction must also be drawn between radical groups or movements that carry a clear ideology and religious drive, in comparison to ones with less determined religious connections. While Al-Qaeda relies on and produces its own ideology, literature and narrative, capitalising on the problems in the region, along with matters such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, Daesh (ISIL) appears to be more politically (or otherwise) driven, with less than a clear ideology or narrative.

In my opinion, it is unlikely that Daesh (ISIL) will last for a long time, because it does not have any fixed and independent ideology as much as Al-Qaeda has. The ability for groups like Daesh (ISIL) to remain strong and influential in the region will be questionable, in comparison with Al-Qaeda (bearing in mind the delay of solutions in Libya, Syria and Iraq). Additionally, the absence of correct knowledge of the Islamic faith and thought is also a factor feeding into radicalisation, with most of the recruited members in these groups being young.

With all these factors and drivers in mind, it is unlikely, in my opinion, that radicalisation in the MENA region will end soon unless realistic solutions are applied to address the underlying problems in the societies. Such solutions cannot be presented without serious and sustainable plans of short, medium and long-term goals across the different layers of local governments and systems.

Non-MENA countries have missed an important opportunity for a positive form of solution-carrying engagement with the region after the Arab Spring. Instead, gaps between the MENA region and outside world are widening, removing trust by the new generation in local politics and Non-MENA countries like the UK. The fact that this distrustful generation is also a victim of various aforementioned problems also means that they are prey to a number of radical groups who recruit them through presenting an alternative view in the absence of other solutions.

Some countries such as Saudi Arabia have come to a higher realisation of the fact that radicalisation is more multi-rooted than imagined, and devised programmes addressing different factors in radicalisation. An example includes the "*Al-Munasaha*" programme, which looks at radicalisation as

rooted in, education, social and economic problems. The programme attempts to educate youth and those affected by radicalisation on misconceptions and Islamic understanding, dealing with issues such as unemployment, and aiding in solving their social problems. Presently, it presents one of the few single multi-angled de-radicalisation programmes in MENA.

However, while such programmes were very successful, they mostly deal with radicalisation and those affected by it after it begins and not before. Despite being part of the overall solution, they must also include matters such as supporting the charitable sector in its efforts to address the phenomenon, improving the value of citizenship, and supporting entrepreneurship (One must also take note of current initiatives in the MENA region, and GCC especially, supporting entrepreneurship, such as under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030).

The solution requires comprehensive programmes to bring about much needed change in the society itself through the implementation of policies for human rights, social equality, fighting poverty and corruption. There must also be programmes to bridge the gap between the State and the society and to rebuild the trust again with the West as a partner, and not as the perceived enemy. From a religious angle, this should also be assisted by credible scholars with experience of the "West" and the Non-MENA world, to begin building bridges between MENA and the outside world.

Local MENA entities and governments will face greater difficulty dealing with this single-handedly. Input is also needed from Non-MENA regions and other stakeholders. The UK, in particular, can play an important role owed to its historical experience in the region, and the lack of recent military involvement (in comparison with countries such as the US, and Russia currently with heavier military involvement).

While Non-MENA states such as the USA and UK have led some initiatives aimed at the involvement and engagement with MENA governments and societies, this has sometimes come at the cost and lack of knowledge of the local culture and society, failing to address domestic concerns, taking that foreign state from being a "friend" to "foe". In order for important actors such as the UK to play a role in MENA, it must – while addressing security concerns in the region – be mindful of social, cultural and economic concerns and demands, also noting the connection with their own communities and societies. There has never been a more important time for the need of a mindful and carefully planned form of engagement with the MENA region, its governments and its societies.