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The Secret to Deradicalizing Militants Might be Found in Middle Eastern Churches

A bold new thesis proposed in extremist studies is based in testimony of Middle Eastern Christian pastors.

JAYSON CASPER/POSTED NOVEMBER 22, 2021



Image: Illustration by Rick Szuecs / Source images: Sohaib Al Kharsa / Unsplash / Abid Katib / Staff / Getty

A Muslim man walked into the offices of a Christian pastor whose congregation in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley has been serving Syrian refugees since the outbreak of civil war.

“I’ve hated you for the past eight years,” the Muslim said, “and I’ve tried to turn my community against you. But three months ago, it was your American doctors who treated me and paid for my hospital stay.

“We hate these people,” he continued, “yet they come here and show us love. Tell me the time of your services; I want to follow Jesus. How great is your Christianity!”

This story, told to CT in October by the pastor, who asked that their names not be used for security reasons, is remarkable. But it is not unique. Evangelical ministers in the Middle East readily recount conversion narratives of the most militant, radicalized Muslims. A second pastor has described how a Syrian confessed that he started coming to church to kill him. Now a believer, the man serves other refugees as a member of the congregation. A third says his once-small Christian fellowship has grown to more than 1,500 largely due to converted refugees. Perhaps as many as 10 percent of them are former extremists.

These accounts and others like them have led Scott Gustafson, a PhD candidate with Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam's Extreme Beliefs program in Amsterdam, to a realization: Evangelical Arab ministry succeeds where millions of dollars of security-based solutions have failed in turning militant Muslims away from violence.

"No one strategizes: Let's deradicalize the extremists," he said. "But it is a demonstrable side effect."

In the diverse academic field trying to find secular pathways out of extremism, this is a novel idea. Gustafson published an [article](#) on it recently in the *Journal for Deradicalization*, making an argument for "Missiological Engagement in Counter/Deradicalization." He has interviewed Christian ministry leaders in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt with testimonies of former extremist figures who have converted to Christianity. Gustafson has had in-depth conversations with half a dozen former extremists as well.

He says the research points to a conclusion that makes a lot of sense to a missiologist like him but is startling to many academics and government officials. Conversion, it seems, changes people. Yet not all of the accounts of deradicalization he has gathered involve conversion. Some maintain their Muslim faith but grow more tolerant of non-Muslims and are willing to work with them for the benefit of others.

Tony Skaff, pastor of Badaro Baptist Church in Beirut, says this is what he sees in prisons where evangelicals have ministered for the past 25 years. As part of a government-sponsored interfaith consortium, his church has the legal right to enter, serve, and preach to the 3,000 incarcerated people.

Weekly worship services draw about 80 people, Skaff said, and he estimates that about 10 percent of them are extremists. Most remain Muslim, even as they attend the Christian service, but the interaction does alter their perspective.

"They see our respect and how we help even if they are not Christians," he said. "Without necessarily converting, many now have a genuine respect for Christianity."

If academics are skeptical of Gustafson's thesis, it's not because it contradicts the reigning academic orthodoxy of best practices for deradicalization. It's because there are no standard accounts of the process. According to Daniel Koehler, head of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies, the field is "more or less completely free of any working standards," and no one really knows what works.

The steps toward extremism are more established. Those who study the process generally agree it's a three-part process. First, there is a perceived grievance that goes unanswered. Second, there's exposure to a narrative or ideology that offers violence as a solution. Third, the individual is adopted into a social network that gives meaning and belonging.

The church, according to Gustafson, can undo each part of that process. It meets real and perceived grievances, especially with the charity work that responds to physical needs that governments are not taking

care of. The gospel message is Jesus' manifesto for undoing violence with love. And the body of Christ adopts individuals into the family of God, giving them a social network imbued with meaning.

It's much more effective than imprisoning former fighters or treating radicalization as a psychiatric problem, Gustafson argues.

Rik Peels, the lead investigator for Extreme Beliefs, which is funded in part by the European Research Council, said the proposed answer is unusual but not out of bounds for academic study. He notes that one of the most significant developments in the field has been an emerging understanding that extremists are not irrational. His project asserts that they consciously choose the wrong response to their situation—a departure from the framework, dominant since 9/11, that tries to explain away extremists' actions through social, physiological, or economic factors.

“We want to listen to them, taking extremists and terrorists seriously as normal, rational, healthy human beings—with reprehensible behavior,” Peels said. “Scott is doing exactly that, as are the churches he studies.”

There has been some corroboration from other research. The RAND Corporation conducted interviews with former radicals and their families and found deradicalization was often triggered by interventions of kindness from hated outsiders.

But not everyone is convinced. Philip Madanat, a Jordanian evangelical who researches political sociology, suspects some are too quick to see a radical behind anyone who calls them a “kafir”—nonbeliever or infidel. He has worked in the camps and never seen a radical refugee. He has also negotiated with terrorists in Syria and dialogued about Jesus with Salafi-Jihadi ideologues whose writings birthed al-Qaeda. He thinks the definition of *radical* matters. Some equate it with support for sharia. Others see it in every practicing Muslim.



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He's also skeptical of the evidence of firsthand and secondhand accounts of deradicalization without verification far beyond the scope of most ministries.

“As long as these people are helped by the church, you cannot rely on their testimony,” he said. “Stop the relief, then check the facts.”

Tim Noble, Gustafson's doctoral supervisor and an associate professor at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague, said that is the challenge for the deradicalization thesis.

“Scott sets out a fascinating, plausible hypothesis that he will have to prove,” he said. “He just has to talk with more former radicals.”

For their part, evangelical pastors such as the one who saw a man convert after eight years of hate are not waiting for evidence. They witness to the gospel because it’s good news, and they take care of people in need because they love Jesus. But deradicalization, Gustafson has helped them realize, is a very visible side benefit.

The pastor in Jordan says the church started a community center that distributes locally grown produce, operates a medical clinic, and even provides free laundry service. But he is most proud of the school, where classrooms replaced the underground lot where people once parked their cars for Sunday worship.

“If you kill a terrorist, ten more will emerge,” the pastor said. “Their displaced children are tempted by all kinds of vices, including radicalization. Education gives them hope.”

But when opening a second location near the camp, Muslim refugee leaders expressed concern they would teach Christianity as they did in the church garage. Similarly, both secular and believing donors make sure there is no discrimination or conditionality in receiving aid.

The church honors all regulations in distribution. But as the pastor told CT, there is no regulation against compassion. And compassion opens radicals to radical change.

Today, he said, having won the trust of the community and donors alike, parents voluntarily send busloads of school children to weekend Bible classes, the wife of an al-Nusra unit leader is graduating as a trained nurse, and 20 former fighters have been saved through their ministry.

“They see the difference and become ambassadors to their own people,” he said. “Love is the real weapon against terrorism.”

Jayson Casper is Middle East correspondent for Christianity Today.



NEWS

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