

# Newsweek

## Inside Denmark's Radical Jihadist Rehabilitation Programme

By [Elisabeth Braw](#) / October 17, 2014 6:37 AM EDT



*REFORMED MAN: Morten Storm put his past as a motorcycle gang member and Islamist behind him in 2006 and became an agent for PET, the Danish equivalent of the FBI, to help fight extremism and terror* Kare Viemose/Polfoto

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“We dissociate ourselves from those people who worship democracy,” says the speaker in the recently released video. “The only one we should worship and follow is Allah.” Switching between Danish and Arabic, the speaker is making a dark sales pitch for the extremist group Millatu Ibrahim, which was banned in Germany two years ago but has now established itself in Denmark.

It seems there’s something jihadist in the state of Denmark. According to a recent survey, the country has more jihadist fighters in Syria than any other EU member state bar Belgium: 100 of them, which equates to 18 per million residents. “The Muhammed cartoons [controversial cartoons published in the daily Jyllands-Posten in 2005] have

played into the increasing polarisation of the Danish society, and there has also been discrimination against immigrants,” explains Magnus Ranstorp, a leading terrorism expert now based at Sweden’s Defence College. “In addition, there are radical imams, and the Islamist group Hizb-ut-Tahrir is pretty big. Young people join it or more radical offshoots and it’s suspected that these offshoots may be playing a role in facilitating trips for them to Syria.”

Belgium has 22 jihadist fighters per million residents; France and Australia, 11; Norway, 10. Britain has six jihadists per million residents, while Sweden has three. A total of 3,000 EU citizens are thought to be fighting in Syria. According to the country’s intelligence agency, PET [Politiets Efterretningstjeneste], jihadist groups recruiting in Denmark are increasingly mentioning Syria.

“Jihadists are a serious problem for us as a country,” acknowledges Anna Mee Allerslev, Copenhagen’s recently elected mayor for integration. “We’ve never had this kind of problem before.” But while other countries are sending their jihadists to court – last month 46 suspected jihadists went on trial in Belgium – the Danes are tackling the problem in an innovative fashion. They’re sending them to the shrink.

“Our main principle is inclusion,” explains Preben Bertelsen, a professor of psychology at the University of Aarhus, who has played a leading role in creating the so-called Aarhus model for jihadist deradicalisation.

“What motivates these young people is not that far from the motivation the rest of us have: a decent life. For them, joining Isis is fighting for utopia, fighting for a place where they’re wanted. In that sense they’re not that different from other young people.”

The Danes are treating their returned jihadists as rebellious teenagers rather than hostile - soldiers beyond redemption. “Jihadists have chosen a path that’s not OK, but the key in the Aarhus model is recognising that these people are not that different from the rest of us,” reports Bertelsen, who now counsels a number of returned fighters. “We’re not stigmatising them or excluding them. Instead, we tell them that we can help them get an education, get a job, re-enter society.” Counsellors tell the jihadists that it’s OK to become politically or religiously radicalised, but that using violence is not.

It’s no coincidence that the programme was developed in Aarhus: the university city’s Grimhøj mosque is reported to have radicalised 23 of the Danish jihadist fighters. The mosque’s spokesman recently expressed support for Isis. Last month the United States added Abdessamad Fateh (also known as Abu Hamza), a Danish citizen of Moroccan origin known in Grimhøj mosque circles and officially residing outside Aarhus, to its list of wanted foreign terrorists. The US government reports that Fateh has travelled to Syria; he’s now thought to be hiding in Scandinavia.

“The jihadists often have a life story of exclusion,” observes Bertelsen. “On the surface they’re well integrated, so Danes keep asking themselves, ‘Why do they hate Denmark so much when we’ve given them so many opportunities?’ But even a well-functioning society has its shadow sides with de facto lack of equal opportunities and exclusion, and the political rhetoric has sometimes been anti-immigrants or racist, so immigrants feel unwanted.” Helping the jihadists feel useful is, then, a logical course of action.

In addition to Aarhus, Copenhagen and several other cities have now introduced the model, and other Scandinavian countries along with the Netherlands are engaged in similar efforts. In Britain, Ranstorp notes that “everybody suspected of being a jihadist is interviewed by the police when returning from abroad”. A Copenhagen city spokesman says that around 30 jihadists, including several who have returned from Syria, have enrolled in the programme.

“Denmark is at the forefront of how to prevent the jihadist problem,” notes Ranstorp. “PET is incredibly active, including outside Denmark, and is also the driving force behind the reintegration efforts.” The agency supplies social workers with dossiers of jihadists, who might benefit from counselling and a helping

At the national level, the government recently announced the launch of a national “exit - centre” for jihadists and others keen to leave their extremist groups. It’s also revoking the passports of those suspected of planning to travel to Syria, or withdrawing their residence permits if they’re not citizens. While fighters are screened, and those who have committed crimes are dealt with by the country’s justice system, the rest of the returnees are indeed given the option of reintegration.

“Quite a few of these youngsters really want to talk to us,” reports Bertelsen. “The jihadists in the programme are here because they’ve heard from their jihadist friends on social media and Skype that when you come back to Denmark, there are people who will help you with reintegration, help you get a job, get a place to live.” Most, he reports, return from Syria disillusioned with jihad.

But, warns Jytte Klausen, a professor of international cooperation at Brandeis University (and graduate of Aarhus University) who has studied jihadist returnees, simply opening the doors for returning fighters is “extremely naïve”, especially considering they have already damaged the West’s reputation in Syria. “We now have Westerners walking around the streets of Raqqa telling the local Muslim population what to do. That creates a serious credibility problem.”

Morten Storm dismisses the initiative altogether: “It’s completely ridiculous,” he says. “It means disregarding the life and dignity of the people the jihadists have been terrorising - simply because the jihadists happen to be Danish. And deradicalising the jihadists doesn’t work, because they’re religiously motivated. Yes, some may enrol, but then they’ll go back to the frontlines.” Storm speaks from a unique vantage point: a Danish al-Qaida member, he was recruited as an informant by PET and helped the CIA locate hate preacher Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen before leaving the jihadist scene.

Yet considering that many of Isis’s members were radicalised in US military jails, giving the less dangerous ones among them a soft welcome home may be less quixotic than it sounds.

“I completely understand why politicians and the US have to use harsh rhetoric against Isis, and it’s an extremely dangerous organisation”, says Bertelsen. “But if these young people don’t see a way out, if they see fighting in Syria as their only option, then we’ve achieved the opposite of what we’re trying to do, which is to defeat Isis. Defeating Isis is a

two-pronged approach.” Denmark is contributing seven fighter jets to the Isis bombing campaign.

Storm, who recently released his autobiography, *Agent Storm*, offers a different solution: “seize jihadists’ assets, freeze their bank accounts and revoke their passports so they can’t leave Denmark for Syria in the first place. They have no loyalty to their Danish citizenship other than using their passport as a tool to travel wherever they want to go.”

He advises Western Europe to be extremely concerned about Isis: “We’ll see a lot of lone-wolf attacks in Europe and North America, with Isis members using cars and knives as their weapons.”

Perhaps the immense concern about the relatively small number of jihadist fighters simply makes them seem more powerful, thus attracting new recruits. “I don’t deny that some people go to Syria to fight,” says Imran Shah, a spokesman for the Islamic Society in Denmark. “But the media in Europe and the United States do their best to justify military action, looking at the problem with a very strong magnifying glass, making it seem bigger than in reality.”

If the allied bombing campaign succeeds, Isis’s 3,000-some European members will face an uncertain future. “Where will they go?” asks Bertelsen. “I fear we’ll end up with nomadic young people having no other opportunity than criminality or violent destructiveness. Unless we help them get reintegrated they’ll look for a new group that’s probably even more aggressive.”