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For Jihadists, Denmark Tries Rehabilitation

By ANDREW HIGGINS DEC. 13, 2014



Oussama el-Saadi, chairman of the Grimhojvej mosque, which critics say breeds radicalism. Credit Jan Grarup for The New York Times

AARHUS, Denmark — In many parts of Europe, he would now be in jail. But here in [Denmark](#)'s second biggest city, the young man, a 21-year-old of Turkish descent who spent 13 months in [Syria](#) fighting in the name of Islam, passes his days playing soccer, working out at the gym and waiting anxiously to see if he has secured a place to study engineering at a well-regarded local university.

“I feel at home. I have no problems here,” the former jihadist warrior, who spoke on the condition that he be identified only as Osman, said. Since his return to this tranquil port city from the battlefields of Syria, he has been part of a pioneering program that treats onetime fighters not as criminals or potential terrorists but as wayward youths who deserve a second chance.

The program, closely watched by authorities around Europe, involves counseling, help with readmission to school, meetings with parents and

other outreach efforts. It was first developed in 2007 to deal with far-right extremists linked to an Aarhus soccer club.

Now, with neo-Nazi hooliganism on the wane and alarm over European jihadists on the rise, it has been redeployed to address one of Europe's most hotly debated issues: How to deal with hundreds of young Muslims who have gone to fight in Syria and now returned home.

In [much of Europe](#), the answer has been to lock them up, or at least put them under investigation by prosecutors. Belgium, Britain, France, Germany and Norway have all detained many returning fighters, on suspicion that they either joined a terrorist organization abroad or violated restrictions on travel to Syria.

The Netherlands has barred some Syria fighters from returning, and ordered those who do and face trial to wear ankle bracelets. Belgium, the country with the highest number of Syria fighters per capita, has not only targeted returnees but also prosecuted people who stayed at home and encouraged others to go to fight.

Mayor Boris Johnson of London summed up what has become Europe's most common response in [an article in The Daily Telegraph](#). "We need to make it crystal clear that you will be arrested if you go out to Syria or Iraq without a good reason," he wrote.

Denmark, with the second-highest number of foreign fighters per capita, has gone in the other direction, shunning punishment in favor of rehabilitation.

"We cannot afford not to include them back in our society and make sure that their path of radicalization is changed, so they can be an active part of our society," said Jacob Bundsgaard, the Social Democrat mayor of Aarhus, a city which is the pioneer of the softer approach.

According to the police, 31 Aarhus Muslims, all of them under the age of 30, have traveled since late 2012 to Syria to support forces battling the government of Bashar al-Assad, but only one of them went this year. Five of these are believed to have been killed, including two women, and 16 have so far returned home.

"What we are doing seems to be working," said Jorgen Ilum, the chief of police for the region, describing the program as a "crime prevention" exercise that seeks to "protect society from extremists," not to mollycoddle jihadists. The police chief acknowledged that full "rehabilitation" of returnees is extremely difficult, and that "none of them are completely normal," but added that none had veered off into militancy since coming home.

Fears that former fighters may run amok in their home countries have been intense since Mehdi Nemmouche, a 29-year-old French Muslim, [killed four people at the Brussels Jewish Museum](#) in May after spending a year in Syria.

A 2013 study by Thomas Hegghammer, a researcher at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment, involving 945 jihadist fighters who returned from previous conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia and elsewhere, found that a maximum of one in nine former fighters came home to plot or carry out attacks in the West. Mr. Hegghammer, in a telephone interview, said the rate for returnees among the approximately 3,000 Europeans who have gone to Syria to fight was, so far, much lower.

In Aarhus, the returnees are screened by the police with help from the domestic security service, known as P.E.T., but so far none of the 16 who came home have been arrested. Instead, they have been offered a “mentor” whose task it is to convince them that militancy has no place in mainstream Islam.

Preben Bertelsen, a psychology professor at Aarhus University whose theories help underpin what is known as the “exit program for radicalized citizens,” said returnees had “lost their moral compass” but “only become ticking bombs if we don’t integrate them” back into society. Aarhus’s approach, he said, aimed to prevent criminal acts by former fighters, not to purge their beliefs. “I am not the political or religious police,” he said.

Erhan Kilic, a Turkish-born Aarhus lawyer and observant Muslim who acts as a mentor, said the biggest hurdle was winning trust. If this can be done, he said, “You can move their ideas in a moderate way” by exposing the flaws in their interpretation of their faith.



Many who left to fight in Syria came from middle-class residential neighborhoods like Rosenhoej, on the outskirts of Aarhus. Credit Jan Grarup for The New York Times

“The problem is not the message of Islam; it is individuals who cause all the problems,” he said, noting that young recruits to militant Islam often know little about their faith and pick up their views from watching videos of incendiary preachers on YouTube or from schoolyard chatter about the West’s humiliation of the Muslim world.

Mohammed, a 25-year-old resident of Somali descent who asked to be identified only by his first name, illustrates how counseling can dissuade at least some young Muslims from extremism. He said he never planned to fight in Syria but did intend to abandon his studies and move to Pakistan after falling in with a group of young radicals who offered friendship and comfort after the death of his mother and a dispute with his high school principal.

Together, he said, they watched videos of Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born jihadist preacher killed in 2011 in Yemen by a [drone attack](#), and convinced one another that “you can never be a good Muslim in Denmark, where you will always be a stranger, and must move to a Muslim country to get respect.”

After the police, tipped off about the group’s growing radicalism, visited his house, Mohammed agreed to accept counseling and, he said, slowly came to see that “I can be a good Muslim, maybe even a better Muslim, in this society.”

Even when the returnees reject counseling, as 10 of the 16 have, they are often willing to accept assistance in adjusting to society. “I don’t need a mentor. I don’t need their help,” Osman, the returned fighter, said. He nonetheless asked a police officer involved in the so-called “deradicalization project” for help getting into college.

He said he had no regrets about going to Syria and had planned to return to the battlefield after visiting his family. Instead, he got married and hopes to start classes in February. Going to Syria now, he said, “is too dangerous.”

The shift in focus from neo-Nazis to Muslim extremists in Aarhus has led to some controversial revisions to the original program, including an initiative by police to open dialogue with a local mosque that critics say is a breeding ground for radical views.

The mosque, attended by 22 of the 31 who have gone to Syria from Aarhus, promotes a fundamentalist Salafi strain of Islam. Right-wing politicians have demanded that it be shut down, particularly after its preacher, Abu Bilal Ismail, gave a sermon in Berlin this summer that fulminated against “Zionist Jews” and called on God to “count them and kill them to the very last one.”

The mayor, Mr. Bundsgard, said the mosque, Grimhojvej, “is a problem” that is “not doing the local community or the Muslim community any good. Their beliefs are fundamentally unacceptable in any person.”

But closing it without any evidence of illegal action, he said, was not an option. “In an open society,” he asked, “how do you challenge without compromising your fundamental principles the fact that some disagree with these fundamental principles?”

Oussama el-Saadi, the mosque’s chairman, said he agreed to allow the authorities in Aarhus to bring their prevention program into the mosque after winning an assurance that officials did not want to meddle in religious matters and would “show respect” to the mosque’s take on Islam.

He denied that the mosque encouraged young Muslims to go to Syria. He said some of those who went to fight had attended the mosque but “there are hundreds of people who come here, so it is impossible for us to know who they all are.”

Toke Agerschou, an official in the local government’s youth department who helps direct the deradicalization program, said dialogue offered the best way “to challenge an entire mind set, a whole worldview.” Putting returnees from Syria in jail, he added, “is easy” but will only expose them to further radicalization, while “integrating them back in society is very hard” but has a higher potential payoff in the long term.

While proud of the results so far, some caution that the real test will come if more hardened fighters who have stayed in Syria and joined the Islamic State militant group start coming home. “If they have returned to Denmark already, they are not real extremists,” Mr. Ilum, the police chief, said.

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