How do you deradicalise returning Isis fighters?

While other western countries are cracking down on jihadists who come back from Syria, Denmark is taking a very different approach – reintegration

Jon Henley
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Denmark has produced more jihadists per head of its population than any other western country bar Belgium. Photograph: Gregor Inkret/Getty Images/iStockphoto

Fifteen minutes west of the cobbled streets and chic boutiques of Aarhus old town in Denmark, on a bleak road of prefabricated warehouses and low-rise industrial units, is a former ice-cream factory that now houses the Grimhojvej mosque.

In this squat, drab building, at prayers or in its Muslim youth group, 22 young men – regular high school and university students and first-jobbers – heard something last year that persuaded them to abandon their families, studies and careers to make jihad in Syria. Now, many are coming back, and Denmark's second city is giving them an unconventional welcome.

Most western countries, fearful of the threat they could

pose, are cracking down on returning fighters. In France, tough new anti-terror legislation allows authorities to seize passports and ID cards from would-be jihadists "likely to jeopardise public security on their return". Britain has arrested at least 60 returnees; government talk has been of long jail terms, or trying to ban more from coming back at all.

At least 30 returning jihadists are facing trial in Germany, which is mulling far stricter exit controls, while, in Antwerp, 46 people were recently accused of belonging to a Belgian group that allegedly recruited and sent fighters to Syria; the group's leader could face up to 15 years in prison.

The so-called Aarhus model, says Preben Bertelsen, a psychology professor at Aarhus University, is about "inclusion. Look: these are young people struggling with pretty much the same issues as any others – getting a grip on their lives, making sense of things, finding a meaningful place in society. We have to say: provided you have done nothing criminal, we will help you to find a way back."

Worshippers at Aarhus's Grimhojvej mosque. Last year 22 young men from the mosque left to become jihadists in Syria. Photograph: Norde Van Ernst/Polfoto

It is not an approach that has met with unanimous approval in Denmark, which, with more than 100 young

jihadists emerging since 2012, has produced more fighters per head of its population than any other western European country bar Belgium. Conservative parties, including the anti-immigration Danish People's Party, have loudly criticised the city's thorough deradicalisation programme as "soft", "naive", "shortsighted" and ultimately "very dangerous". The Venstre party has called for returning jihadists to be stripped of their citizenship and handed six-year jail terms.

But in his office on the fifth floor of East Jutland police headquarters in Aarhus, superintendent Allan Aarslev, who is in charge of the police end of the programme, waves away any suggestion that the city's approach represents the easy option. "What's easy," he says, "is to pass tough new laws. Harder is to go through a real process with individuals: a panel of experts, counselling, healthcare, assistance getting back into education, with employment, maybe accommodation. With returning to everyday life and society. We don't do this out of political conviction; we do it because we think it works."

Combined with a newly opened, intensive and sometimes difficult dialogue between city officials and leaders at the Grimhojvej mosque, it does indeed seem to work: from late 2012 until the end of last year, 31 men aged between 18 and 25 left Aarhus, a city of 325,000 people, bound for Syria. This year, to the best of anyone's knowledge, there has been just one.

It may have launched only at the start of this year, but Aarhus's exit programme builds on a longstanding, integrated and very Danish approach to crime prevention that has operated for more than 30 years, stresses Aarslev's commanding officer, police commissioner JØrgen Ilum.

Police, social services and schools have all worked closely together and exchanged information here since

the 1980s. From 2007, in the wake of the Madrid and London bombings of 2004 and 2005, anti-radicalisation efforts in Aarhus – concentrated until then mainly on the threat from Danish biker gangs and assorted far-right and far-left groups – switched to take in the risks of religious radicalisation and homegrown terrorism.

In Aarhus, police, social services and schools work closely together. Photograph: Laerke Posselt/Polfoto/Laerke Posselt/VU

“We involve teachers, social workers, youth clubs,” Ilum says. “We train them to spot the early signs. We mentor youths we consider at risk and run workshops in schools. We have good contacts with our minority groups, and with parents. When, in 2012, some young people started to travel to Syria in spite of everything, they were the first to tell us.”

Fighting in Syria, as long as it is not for an outlawed group, is not illegal, and Danish law does not allow authorities to forbid people from travelling. “We can’t take passports,” says the commissioner. “We have laws against participating in banned terrorist groups; fundraising, that kind of thing. But our only real tool is to try to persuade them not to go.”

In many cases, this approach was enough. Sometimes it wasn’t. The young jihadists who travelled to Syria from this port city in 2012 and 2013 were mostly radicalised very fast – many in a matter of weeks, or at

most months, in and around the Grimhojvej mosque. They share, says Bertelsen, the Aarhus model's psychology expert, certain common traits.

"On the surface, they may appear perfectly integrated: middle class, well educated, from stable families," he says in his study at the university. "But beneath, deep down, there is often a history of exclusion: daily, low-level racism; of just … feeling different from other Danes. They're caught between two cultures: one at home, one outside. And between two identities: one fully integrated, the other not feeling welcome here. These are young people who are looking for existential answers." Not – or not yet, and certainly not necessarily – hardcore extremists.

Aarslev completes the profile: 29 of Aarhus's young fighters are second-generation immigrants, he says. A clear majority are from African families, mainly Somali. Others are of Turkish, Palestinian and Iraqi origin: a cross-section of the city's immigrant communities. (Immigrants make up barely 15% of Aarhus's population, although in some suburbs – including Brabrand, home to Grimhojsvej – the figure is two-thirds.)

"In other times, under different circumstances, they might have ended in a gang," says Aarslev. "Instead, they found radical religion. That's fine, of course: we don't mind what religious or political opinions people have – as long as they don't support, or take part in, illegal activity." (Bertelsen puts it more bluntly: "The message," he says, "has to be: it's great that you have religious, political convictions, that you're critical of society. Just, please, find some way to deal with them that does not involve violence.")

Of the 31 Aarhus youths who went to Syria, five have died there. Ten are still abroad, and 16 have returned. Ilum says the exit programme's workers, alerted by a call to a permanently staffed hotline, have spoken to all

of the returnees: they have been asked – not ordered – to come in to the police station, have been screened and carefully assessed.

“But this is not a get-out-of-jail-free card,” the commissioner says. “If we think we have reason to believe they have committed crimes, we will investigate and prosecute.” So far, police have been unable to prove any of the city’s returnees actively supported, or engaged in, terrorism.

So what happens to them next? Their identities are, for obvious reasons, kept secret. But half a dozen young returnees have declared they need no further help and will try to pick up their lives where they left off – so Aarhus police have simply handed their files over to the Danish intelligence service, and asked that a watchful eye be kept on them.

The remaining 10 have accepted varying degrees of help. Some are “extremely disillusioned by what they’ve seen and are no longer even thinking of Syria,” says Aarslev. “But others still talk of going back, and some remain part of the youth group at the mosque. But even there we see signs their views are evolving: half are already back at school, the rest either working or looking for work.”

Three jihadists, though, have said they would like more sustained help to extract themselves from an environment of which they no longer want to be a part. For them, the exit programme is effectively tailor-made; two are even being helped to move away from city altogether.

Aarhus old town. Some here have criticised the city's deradicalisation programme as 'soft', 'naive' and 'very dangerous'. Photograph: Alamy

The most important component of the Aarhus process, all involved agree, is its use of individual mentors, to whom the would-be or returning fighter can turn for both practical, day-to-day help and serious religious and moral debate.

Michael, who spoke on condition of anonymity, has been one of the city's dozen deradicalisation mentors since 2010. He is now working with his fourth mentee, a secondary-school student "wholly obsessed with the idea of going to Syria. To the point that he can't concentrate on anything else. Physically, he's there – at school, for example – but not mentally."

Two of Michael's clients were referred to him because alert members of Aarhus's prevention network – teachers, police officers, youth workers – had picked up early signs of radicalisation: a new and intense interest in religion; high levels of activity on particular websites; sudden changes in clothing and appearance; closing down existing relationships with friends and family. One was a returning fighter, desperate to go back to school and pass his final-year exams.

With all of them, he says: "I can, and do, help with homework, applications, practical stuff like that. But we

also talk, a lot – about religion, Islam, free speech, politics, international relations. Serious, philosophical, intellectual conversations, twice a week for two, three hours."

These meetings can take place anywhere, says Michael, who has a university background in religious studies and comparative religion: in cafes, parks, sometimes in the canteen of the university library where he is talking to me now, surrounded by "books and wisdom and learning and open minds".

The goal is not "to persuade them to give up their religious conviction," he says, "but to help them balance that religious perspective with school, work, family – with life, in fact. To be able to see questions from a different angle, to have a more … nuanced understanding. A broader horizon."

Religion, Michael says, has simply "taken over these young men's lives; there's no room for anything else. Often, when we first meet, they will say: 'That's just the way it is, nothing else is possible.' And they believe absolutely this very simple idea, that if they go to Syria they will be doing their religious duty, and Allah will be pleased with them."

Like many Aarhus mentors, Michael was trained by Bertelsen. Up in his study, the psychology professor says the core of his contribution to the programme involves what he calls "life psychology – my conviction that, whatever your issues, whatever your background or even your diagnosis, you still need certain life skills in order to have a good life."

For would-be and returning jihadists alike, Bertelsen says, "those skills should equip them to be resilient – not to cope with their issues by falling for some Islamic State video online. It's about learning to participate socially; being able to see other people's perspectives; dealing with value clashes. Ordinary life skills that we

all need."

But vitally, in parallel with its exit programme, Aarhus also decided early this year to start talking to the Grimhojvej mosque. "We confronted them with their responsibilities," says Ilum. "Now we hold monthly meetings. We discuss, debate, exchange. There is a real dialogue."

The city's young and energetic Social Democrat mayor, Jacob Bundsgaard, frames that decision rather more firmly: "We needed, as a city, to make it very clear to the religious community that if it is not a part of the solution, it is a part of the problem," he says. "There had to be a real, a serious dialogue, and they had to actively start discouraging people from travelling. We said if they weren't prepared to do that, we would wind up the pressure, including legally, and we would do it very publicly, out in the open, and in the media."

The bottom line, Bundsgaard says, had to be the message that it was "simply not in any way acceptable for young people to get involved in a conflict thousands of miles away that is not their conflict, that may get them killed, or leave them mentally or physically scarred – and open to prosecution".

That is not entirely how the mosque sees it, of course. In his office there, its amiable chairman, Oussama el Saadi, says young people who left Grimhojvej for Syria went "to help. To make a difference. This is very normal in our religion: our friends, our brothers, our community are suffering in Syria, and we try to help them. Jihad is not just holy war."

They are now coming back, he says, mainly because, far from helping fellow Muslims in a vicious but black-and-white war against a brutal regime, they found themselves caught up in bloody infighting between the various radical Muslim groups now battling for control of Syria: "The situation is not so simple, so

straightforward any more," el Saadi says.

Grimhojvej enjoys a reputation for radicalism far beyond Aarhus: in Germany, police are investigating one of its imams, Abu Bilal Ismail,after he urged worshippers at a Berlin mosque this summer to "kill the Zionist Jews"; in the US, the State Department recently added another, Abdessamed Fateh, who preached at Grimhojvej until 2013, to its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

But the mosque seems to have adopted a slightly more moderate position, at least on the issue of jihad. It still refuses to condemn IS outright. "It is something new, and this is a war and they are doing horrible things to each other," says Fadi Abdallah, the Grimhojvej spokesman. "We are in Denmark; we don't have the information here to say whether we support IS or not. We don't support the killing of innocent people; that is not part of Islam. But we have to wait and see if, overall, IS is really a part of Islam."

And it publicly supports "self-determination, a Middle East caliphate – that is an idea of our religion," Abdallah says, and warns that the Danish government's recent move to join US-led air strikes agains IS may encourage homegrown extremism. But even if Abdallah insists no one at Grimhojvej has ever "advised to travel to Syria", and that it was "a real surprise" to learn from the police that 22 young men from the mosque had done just that, he confirms that it is now "preaching actively that it is not a good idea to travel".

The mosque is not formally a part of the exit programme, but "the idea is definitely the right one", he says. "It is a good thing not to treat these young people as criminals, as they are doing in London and elsewehere. It is much better to treat them well; that way they would feel ashamed to do something bad when they have come back. If you treat them harshly,

unfairly, they will start hating society."

For the mayor, the city's position has the advantages of clarity and simplicity. "You cannot pass laws to legislate on how people think or feel or what they believe," Bundsgaard says. "But what you can do is be sincere about dialogue and integration." (It also helps, he says, that the city council "speaks with a united voice – even the conservative opposition have voted for this and play an active part in it".)

Top-down, hardcore measures – laws, blanket bans, all the rest – are all well and good, Aarhus seems to say. But nothing beats what Bundsgaard calls a "co-ordinated, hands-on, ground-level, everyday approach – just pushing people in the right direction, and discouraging them from taking the wrong one".

Plus, says commissioner Ilum, "If we weren't doing this, we really could not do much. We can't prosecute without evidence. And then these people would just be floating around, a potential danger. Which would you rather?"