Challenges to Educational Approaches that Prevent Violent Islamic Extremism in Denmark

by Max Barrett Werner

With the recent terrorist attack in Paris, and stories of young European Muslims leaving for Syria to join ISIS, Islamic extremism has become one of the most debated subjects in the West. Accordingly, Western governments have attempted to combat this latest wave of ideological extremism by a variety of means, such as the “War on Terror” and through increased surveillance of their Muslim citizens. Among the softer approaches, education has emerged as a long-term method of curtailing extremism through the promotion of tolerance, mutual understanding, and religious diversity. As former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair asserted in a speech to the UN security council in 2013: “In the 21st century education is a security issue.” In a Danish context, terrorism and Islamic radicalization are high on the agenda as well, especially since the international crisis brought on by the Danish publication of drawings of the Prophet Mohammed in 2005 and, latest, the shooting in Copenhagen leaving two men dead. This paper focuses on the challenges to educational approaches intended to prevent religious extremism in Denmark. It argues that while the proportion of Muslims in Denmark who are radicalized is very small, the discrimination and marginalization that Muslims face in Denmark is the main obstacle to develop educational approaches that prevent religious extremism. Furthermore, I contend that one of the most important tools to change the discriminatory climate is education that promotes tolerance and intercultural and religious understanding. Notably, a broad range of policy-makers, public

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2 Note that I refer to “radicalization” as the process by which people turn to violent religious extremism and not religious extremism in general.
debaters, educators, and academics in Denmark are engaged in working out different ways in which to prevent extremism through education both on a national and European level.

Despite the relatively small number of people who have become radicalized, proportional to its population, Denmark has produced the second largest number of Islamists who have travelled to the Middle East to fight for violent extremist organizations. Security officials estimate that more than 130 Danes have travelled to Syria or Iraq to fight for radical Islam. The motives behind the radicalization of these primarily young men are complex, and often personal stories and experiences intertwine with broader social and political developments in causal explanations. Nonetheless, many scholars argue that one of the main reasons for radicalization is the systematic discrimination and marginalization that Muslims face throughout Europe. This has been perpetuated by much of the European mainstream media as well as neo-nationalist populist politicians producing orientalist discourses about Muslims and portraying Islam as monolithic, intolerant and as inherently incompatible with Western democratic culture. Although this development has taken place across Europe, and the consequences have been similar from country to country, Islamophobia is particularly present in Denmark; and because discrimination can be seen as the main obstacle to developing educational approaches that prevent radicalization of Muslims, it is pertinent to examine the ways in which Islamophobia affects Danish Muslims.

6 See Anderson, “Terrorist Created?”
Muslims in Denmark face discrimination and marginalization in various ways. First, the labor market is less accessible to Danish Muslims compared to non-Muslim Danes. In 2009, a report found that job applicants with a typical Danish name were significantly more likely to be interviewed for a job compared with applicants with names suggesting a Middle Eastern, Turkish, or Pakistani (i.e. Muslim) background. Furthermore, the report found visible religious expression to be disadvantageous for applicants. In particular, Islamic religious symbols such as the headscarf or large beards were seen as obstacles for job applicants.\(^7\) In short, coupled with lower degrees of education and below-average socio-economic positions, Muslims in Denmark do not have the same opportunities as non-Muslims.\(^8\)

Importantly, Muslims face Islamophobia and racism on a day-to-day level with racial slurs, fear and hostility on the job, in school, in public spaces as well as discriminatory remarks about Islam in the mainstream media. Indeed, A noteworthy example is the scolding made by school leader to a group of young students after they had disturbed the class: “I am so damn tired of you Muslims disrupting teaching.”\(^9\) Far from promoting tolerance and inter-religious understanding, this case shows how the educational sector can be complicit in perpetuating stereotypes of Muslims.\(^10\) Certainly, this is antithetical to article 26 of the UDHR in which education should promote “understanding, tolerance, and friendship.”\(^11\) This atmosphere generates tension between Muslims and non-Muslims and contribute to an exclusionary society in which Muslims do not feel

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\(^9\) Ibid. Notably, she was reprimanded for this remark. Translated from: “Jeg er så skide træt at jer muslimer, som ødelægger undervisningen!”
at home even though they were born and raised in Denmark. Furthermore, this is fuelled by “media coverage of Muslims in Denmark [that] has been focused on divisive controversies.”  

Notably, politicians feed into and perpetuate Islamophobia and stigmatization of Muslims. As the European Commission on Racism and Intolerance writes: “Of deep concern is the prevailing climate of opinion concerning individuals of foreign backgrounds and the impact and use of xenophobic propaganda in politics.” The most extreme example of the Islamophobia evident in the Danish political discourse is the neo-nationalist Danish People’s Party (DPP), which in the most recent national election became the second largest party in Denmark. There are a multitude of examples of DPP’s stigmatization of Muslims ranging from highly racist statements made by DDP politicians, election campaigns focusing on the “threat” that Muslims pose to Danish society and culture, and policy suggestions that aim to “protect” Denmark from the influence of Muslims and Islam. For instance, in 1999 DPP proposed that if “3rd generation immigrants” living in social ghettos (i.e. people with a Muslim background) repeatedly committed crime, their whole family should be deported to their country of origin. Beyond the proposition’s obvious deeply problematic consequences, the language employed by DPP here, and in numerous other cases, reveal the extent to which Islamophobia saturate their political discourse. The concept of a “3rd generation immigrant,” primarily used to designate citizens with a Muslim background, divides citizens with an immigrant background from ethnically Danish citizens, and creates an “us and

12 “Islam in Denmark.”
13 Quoted in “Islam in Denmark.”
them” binary framework in which Muslim citizens are not perceived as Danish citizens at all, but as outsiders threatening Danish society with their criminal and religious behavior.\(^\text{15}\)

Moreover, this type of political discourse have been emulated by many of the mainstream political parties in Denmark in an effort of garnering votes and not appearing “soft” on immigration issues. As such, the largest and historically most important party, the Social Democrats, have been accused of trying to assimilate the platform of DPP into their political program. Besides increasing the already harsh restrictions on immigration and asylum, former Prime Minister Hell Thorning-Schmidt, ran on the slogan ”The Denmark that you know” in the recent campaign, echoing DDP’s nationalist rhetoric of “reclaiming Denmark” from the subservice forces of Muslims.\(^\text{16}\)

With one of the most restrictive policies on immigration, refugees and asylum seekers, Denmark has become the target of heavy criticism from human rights groups for violating UN conventions.\(^\text{17}\) Lately, the new right-wing government has produced videos urging Syrian refugees not to come to Denmark while reducing benefits for asylum seekers, which, according to some commentators, exemplify the intolerance and exclusivity of Denmark.\(^\text{18}\)

The Islamophobic climate in Denmark that discriminate and stigmatize Muslims is the context in which Danish Muslims become radicalized. Thus, contrary to common (mis)perceptions circulating in the mainstream media that perceive religion to be the underlying cause for radicalization of young men, it is the widespread discrimination and racism towards Muslims as


well as the lack of educational and vocational opportunities that contribute to radicalization. In his book, “Danmarks Børn i Hellig Krig” (“Denmark’s Children in Holy War”), Journalist Jacob Sheik examines the reasons behind Danish Muslims’ radicalization. He finds that feelings of exclusion and marginalization are present in most cases of radicalization and, as he states, “one commonality of many Muslim that venture to Syria from Denmark is that they experience being socially stigmatized in the period preceding their radicalization.”

Similarly, sociologist Aydin Seoi points out that Muslim boys and young men in social ghettos often face stigmatization and feel excluded from mainstream Danish society. Instead of participating as Danish citizens, they often develop countercultural identities that are in opposition to mainstream Danish society, most notably by joining criminal or religious organizations. Indeed, a report found that nine out of ten radicalized youth have been involved in gangs and other criminal behavior prior to their conversion to Islamic extremism. Furthermore, as radicalized youth often do not come from particularly religious homes, and therefore do not have much knowledge about Islam, they are susceptible to violent interpretations that offer them an identity, a purpose, and a way to self-empowerment. In regard to educational approaches to prevent this development, Seoi argues that knowledge about religions may prevent radicalization, as it would provide young people with alternative understandings of Islam.

As the main impediment to educational approaches that prevent extremism arguably is the widespread Islamophobia, discrimination, and stigmatization of Muslims, it is pertinent to examine the challenges involved in fighting discrimination at an educational level. In a report concerning

19 Jamie Schjødt Kold, “Der er også noget konstruktivt ved hellig krig”, Dagbladet Information, (10 October 2015) http://www.information.dk/547888 (8 December 2015); quote translated from: ”Et fællestræk for flere af Syriensfarerne er, at de oplever at være socialt stigmatiseret i perioden op til deres radikalisering.”

discrimination of Muslims published by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), a wide array of experts discuss the specific challenges confronting educators engaged in addressing discrimination and combating Islamophobia. The report stresses that this endeavour is a complex and time-consuming process that requires patience on the behalf of educators and, ideally, it should strive to “include the broader community beyond the school.” More specifically, it recommends that teachers should emphasize the complexity of these issues, and warns of dangers of “singling out one identifier – Muslim” instead of looking at the larger picture and history of exclusion, discrimination, and intolerance. Finally, the report points out the importance of teachers’ professional development concerning these areas (such as intercultural knowledge and religious literacy) as well as the need for “practical resources and materials” in the educational process.21

In Denmark, educational initiatives to prevent radicalisation of Muslim students include theme weeks about community, citizenship, democracy as well as making relevant material regarding radicalization available for teachers. Although there is broad support for incorporating ideas of democracy and citizenship into the educational curriculums, programs that specifically aim to prevent radicalization have been met with criticism. For example, a program that aims to teach 4th grade students about radicalization and terrorism and that is meant to prevent students from radicalizing in Aarhus, Denmark’s second largest city, has been met with scepticism from some intellectuals in Denmark. These critics maintain that while education about democratic values and community is never a bad idea, they should not be framed as preventing Islamic extremism, since there is a danger of representing Islam as threatening and thereby singling out

Muslim students as potential terrorists. Moreover, they maintain that the problem of radicalization is extremely small in schools and the amount of kids in danger of radicalizing is very low. As Jens Bruun states: “The school should not be democratic because there exists anti-democratic forces, but because our society is democratic.”22 Furthermore, although educational approaches that promote mutual understanding and prevent religious extremism are being implemented on local levels, the federal government has not included education in its anti-radicalization program to which it has allocated 60.9 million DKK (roughly CAD$12.3 million).23

Another challenge to educational approaches that promote mutual understanding and religious diversity is the role of Christianity in the Danish public school system. Notably, it is not compulsory for public schools to teach religion; rather, they have “Christian studies” as a mandatory part of the curriculum in which it is not obligatory to teach students about other religions until grade 9. The position of the State Church in Denmark, and more specifically, the position of Christianity in the public school system, may be an impediment to creating an educational atmosphere in which Muslim students feel included as Danish Citizens. Indeed, as students learn that Christianity is a fundamental part of Danish culture and what it means to be Danish, this may plant the seeds of feelings of exclusion amongst Muslim students within Danish society at large. Instead, as the NGO “Humanistisk Samfund” (Humanistic Society) argues, by changing Christian Studies into, for example, “Religion and Ethics” may provide Danish students


with a wide array of both religious and non-religious outlooks that will deepen their critical sense as well as prepare them to be tolerant and open-minded citizens. In the context of inter-religious and cultural understanding, this is essential in any educational approach aimed at preventing religious extremism, and students may benefit from a broader perspective on religions rather than only be presented with Christianity as the foundational religion in Denmark. This may provide mutual understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim students by breaking down barriers as well as pervasive stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslims and Islam.

Since schools play a fundamental role in the socialization process of citizens, in societies that claim to be open, tolerant, and democratic, it is essential that the educational system promotes mutual understanding as well as religious and cultural diversity. As Denmark becomes increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious, and as the Muslim population grows (despite severe resistance to both these developments), this kind of education is not only a central way of preventing violent religious extremism and radicalization, it is also integral to avoid the continuation of discrimination and stigmatization of Muslims prevalent in Denmark today. Indeed, as we have seen, these issues are deeply intertwined, and the main challenge to develop educational approaches that prevent religious extremism is the widespread Islamophobia and stigmatization of Muslims in Denmark. Furthermore, although the problems of this discriminatory climate is on the agenda, and there are local initiatives attempting to combat Islamophobia through education, the political rhetoric in Denmark perpetuates these problems as the DPP continues to push the political discourse in an increasingly Islamophobic direction. In order to overcome these issues, politicians must distance themselves from anti-Muslim rhetoric as well as allocate funds to improve inter-

cultural and religious understanding, diversity, and tolerance both amongst students and amongst teachers. Only then can Danish society undermine the appeal of religious extremist organization as a viable alternative to participating in democratic process as Danish citizens.


