



# *Dealing with radicalization*

*Four reflections on Flemish radicalization policy*

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# 1 Radicalization as a policy challenge

The problem of radicalization has been an issue for European policy-makers since 2004. That spring, a series of bombs exploded on a number of commuter trains in Madrid. In the summer of 2005 a similar attack was committed in London on the city's tube network. In both cases the attacks were the work of groups described as being "inspired by Al Qaeda". A Europe-wide debate arose in this context on the topic of "violent radicalization", in which the Dutch, British and supranational European authorities played an important pioneering role.<sup>1</sup> For some time, France was reluctant to join in the discussion. Obviously the country was concerned about potential terrorist acts on its own territory, but it gave the radicalization paradigm less of a key role in its approach.<sup>2</sup> Belgium, however, chose to follow the European policy narrative. The Ministerial Committee of 25 March 2005 adopted the Radicalism Action Plan<sup>3</sup>, motivated in part by the fact that several of the men who committed the attacks in Madrid had been radicalized in Belgium.<sup>4</sup> Later that year, the relevance of such policy initiatives was confirmed when Muriel Degauque, a woman from Charleroi in Belgium, committed a suicide attack in Iraq.

In Flanders, however, policy-makers only really focused on radicalization as a possible precursor of terrorism when it emerged, in the course of 2013, that a disproportionately high number of young Belgians had left for Syria to fight against the regime of Bashar Al-Assad.<sup>5</sup> This was clearly a cause for concern, only increasing as the configuration of the Syrian conflict changed and it became clear that a large number of the Flemish combatants in Syria had joined the ranks of the Islamic State. Concern was mixed with bafflement when it was found that a large number of women and girls, in some cases entire families, were leaving for Syria; and In May 2014 this concern finally turned to fear when a man attacked the Jewish Museum in Brussels, followed by a number of terrorist attacks in France and Denmark in 2015. At the same time, a terrorist cell was dismantled in Verviers (Belgium), foiling their plans for an attack. In Brussels and Paris, the attacks in question were carried out by so-called returning Jihadis.<sup>1</sup>

This established a sense of urgency. A pressing need was felt for policy initiatives, also on the Flemish level. Municipalities had already expressed discontent earlier about the lack of a Flemish (and federal) radicalization policy.<sup>6</sup> This changed with the advent of a new Government of Flanders in 2014. Minister Liesbeth Homans, who is in charge of coordinating the Flemish radicalization policy, published a concept paper.<sup>7</sup> On 14 January 2015, the Flemish Parliament established a committee to combat violent radicalization, which organised five hearings with experts and organizations with relevant experience. They discussed a wide range of topics and areas of responsibility under the headings of security, education, welfare and diversity. The Committee's work has meanwhile given rise to a draft Flemish Parliament resolution.<sup>8</sup>

The role of the Government of Flanders is generally seen in the context of prevention, the importance of which was underlined by a recent Resolution of the UN Security Council.<sup>9</sup> Minister Homans's concept paper does indeed focus on the "prevention of radicalization processes, which may lead to extremism and terrorism." Flanders is responsible among other things for education, youth, welfare, work, integration, urban policy, media and culture. The government believes there

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<sup>1</sup> The Danish offender declared his "loyalty to the Islamic State" on Facebook. He had a criminal record and prior to the terrorist attack had spent time in jail after being sentenced for assault. There is no evidence that he ever stayed in Syria or was really in contact with the Islamic State. He may have been inspired by the attacks in Paris. Cf., <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/17/europe/denmark-copenhagen-gunman/>

is potential for worthwhile interventions in all of these policy areas, or in the case of urban policy, for further reinforcing a supportive role at the Flemish policy level. Since then, the Home Affairs Government Agency<sup>1</sup> has appointed a civil servant as coordinator. A consultation body with civil servants from the various Flemish administrations is also being set up. The Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities in the meantime has appointed an employee who will man a helpdesk. The aim now is to develop and implement a policy within these structures. This policy will penetrate into and interact with policy areas that are already heavily institutionalised, that have their own particularities, and that have set priorities within their limited budgetary frameworks.

This note offers a number of reflections on how to develop such a policy. We have formulated these ideas in the light of contributions made and discussions held during the hearings of the Committee for Combating Violent Radicalization. The four points we discuss here do not exhaust the lessons that could have been drawn from the wealth of information and insights debated during the hearings; for instance we do not (or not sufficiently) address issues of an administrative nature.

We shall develop four reflections. These thoughts address the radicalization process in reverse chronological order. A first consideration relates to the actual transgressive behaviour that drove policy-makers to develop a Flemish radicalization policy. Under the second point we discuss the actual radicalization process, which is widely considered the cause of such transgressive behaviour. The third point focuses on the alleged “cause of the cause”, namely how radicalization occurs within a societal context and is to some extent fed by this context. The fourth point, finally, considers how policy, including radicalization policy, contributes to shaping that same societal context. More specifically, we will develop the following premises:

1. The clearest and most obvious manifestation of the current radicalization problem is terrorist violence and combatants leaving for Syria. An accurate assessment of the war in Syria and migration to that country will help us to describe the radicalization phenomenon in our society better, and to develop a policy response to it.
2.
  - a. Radicalization is a process that transcends the individual level. Groups can also radicalize. The development processes that fuel individual and group radicalization can be quite different.
  - b. Religious radicalization leads to religious fundamentalism. Religious radicalization is perceived as confrontational in a secularized society. But religious radicalization does not always give rise to violence.
3. While social deprivation may have an impact on radicalization, no direct cause and effect has been established. The integration paradox exists but it does not eliminate the influence of social deprivation. At first glance, the integration paradox lies in the fact that highly skilled, relatively well-off young adults decide to participate in the Jihad. But the real integration paradox is that involvement in society actually manifests itself as isolation.

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<sup>1</sup> Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur

4. A radicalization policy unfolds within society as a whole and will influence the way in which this society – and specific target groups within it, including the policy’s primary target audience – is mobilized around the phenomenon of radicalization. One cannot exclude that well-intentioned initiatives may give rise to counterproductive results.

This note looks at consequences in order to understand the causes, and at actions in order to understand their context. One important reason is that these “actions” and “consequences” can be described more objectively than the “causes” and the “context”. Another reason is that the description we give of an action will influence our beliefs about which causes and which context may have had an impact on these actions. This paper aims to caution policy-makers against descriptions of the causes and consequences that are too facile and too one-sided. There are still many unknown factors. Even so, this paper offers a framework for gradually gaining a deeper and more correct understanding of the phenomenon of radicalization – its manifestation and its background – over time. Where possible and necessary, we have provided a preliminary factual account: this applies for instance to the first reflection. In the last section of this paper we also outline a research agenda on radicalization as a policy issue, aimed partly at giving the three other reflections a more empirical or practical content.



## 2 Four reflections on Flemish radicalization policy

**I. The clearest and most obvious manifestation of the current radicalization problem is terrorist violence and combatants leaving for Syria. An accurate assessment of the war in Syria and migration to this country will help us to describe the radicalization phenomenon better and to develop a policy response to it.**

The definition of a target for policy will influence the policy that is implemented. A sweeping definition of poverty will result in a different anti-poverty policy compared with a narrow definition of poverty. In the same way, a radicalization policy will take on a different form, or focus on different points, depending on the interpretation of the radicalization problem. A central question in this context is the definition of the threat and the definition of what counts as, or is experienced as, transgressive behaviour that demands a response. A repressive radicalization policy can define clear boundaries, based on penal law. When an individual joins a terrorist group, or commits a terrorist crime in Belgium or abroad, the government can intervene.

A preventive policy, however, intervenes at an earlier stage. Such a policy should never lose sight of why it was created. When the hearings of the Committee for Combating Violent Radicalization were organized, the driving motivation was the image of the Syrian combatant. The evidence given by two mothers, at the end of the series of hearings, about the impact of the departure of their sons only emphasized this. Their testimony, however, suggested that there might have been more to their sons' departure to Syria than just joining a terror group. A preventive policy can benefit from taking this suggestion to heart and trying to understand why exactly people leave for Syria. A brief analysis of an Antwerp court's recent reading of this departure can help us understand the limitations of defining the problem from a purely repressive standpoint.

Recently the Antwerp Court of First Instance in Antwerp condemned forty-five members of Sharia4Belgium based on the anti-Terrorism Act. In its ruling the court stated that "the criminal file shows that [Sharia4Belgium] sought to engage in a violent Jihadist struggle all over the world, in any war area. The Syrian war" - according to the court - "was a perfect opportunity for Sharia4Belgium to put this ambition into practice."<sup>10</sup> The court's sentence and its cited reasons beautifully summarize how "radicalization" is usually defined as a policy problem. Sharia4Belgium's charismatic leader managed to establish a hold over a number of vulnerable youngsters thanks to an active recruitment strategy. They became obsessed by a dangerous interpretation of Islam calling for physical Jihad. The group's first (proto-)terrorist act was the destruction of the police station of Molenbeek, in the margin of a protest march against the ban on wearing a Niqab. When the civil war in Syria erupted, the members of Sharia4Belgium were encouraged to go and fight in Syria on the side of Al-Nusra and afterwards of the Islamic State. In this context they effectively committed terrorist acts or war crimes. The court ruled that the group's leader, who did not depart for Syria himself, was responsible for the radicalization of these youngsters. He "indoctrinated and isolated [these young people] from their natural family environment."<sup>11</sup>

Putting the traditional discourse in a nutshell, "vulnerable youngsters are easy to radicalize. They fall prey to evil forces thanks to recruitment practices. Radicalization is justified in ideological or

religious terms, but this is just a paltry excuse for the real objectives, namely to resort to violence. The relationship with violence is judged to be inherent and ultimately the real problem is violent terrorism." *This interpretation has the advantage of being clear, and it gives rise to clear policy actions. On the policy level it implies a strong reliance on the work of the intelligence services, as well as preventively increasing young adults' resilience so that they can withstand such recruitment methods.* These are among the cutting-edge measures of federal radicalization policy.

A more comprehensive policy for preventing radicalization cannot, however, be based on such a single-track interpretation. The boundary that it traces will always be more vague than the legal parameters that a court can and must apply, precisely because it seeks to intervene at a stage of the process before any violence has been committed. Deciding which signals need closer attention, and when to raise the alarm, is a really difficult question for parents and family members and for first-line workers in education, in welfare and in youth clubs.

A preventive radicalization policy may not apply such a uniform, simple interpretation because it is *too simple a representation of the facts.* According to the last published data (4 March 2015) on departures for Syria, Belgium saw 426 adults (and an unknown number of minors) leave, mainly from Flanders.<sup>12</sup> This is a lot, compared with other European countries (and taking into account population size). Generally speaking, however, this is the first time in recent history that so many "foreign fighters" in all of Europe have left relatively prosperous Western countries to go fight abroad.<sup>13</sup> We can distinguish between different types of Jihadis within this group. During the hearings, Bilal Benyaich enumerated six types: the loser jihadi, the hard core jihadi, the romantic, the rebel, the follower, the opportunist and the nationalist combatant (this also includes the European Kurds fighting with the Peshmerga).<sup>14</sup>

Another noteworthy and new fact from the European perspective is that girls, women and entire families are also travelling to Syria. *The continuous flow of travellers to Syria and their diverse profile makes sense in the light of the emergence, the transformation and the success of the Islamic State. We can define our policy on radicalization more precisely and set more adequate targets for it by gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon of the Islamic State and its specific appeal to inhabitants of Western countries.* In any event, the reasoning of the Antwerp Court of First Instance that such people would travel to "any war-torn area" appears to be mistaken.

The Islamic State was founded in 2003 in response to the American presence in Iraq. For some time, the group was an ally of Al Qaeda, but the relations between the two groups were always tense.<sup>15</sup> Both of these organizations use terrorist tactics and both strive for the same objective, namely to reunite the *umma* – the community of believers – and create a (salafist, sunni) caliphate. Whereas Al Qaeda, however, adopted a de-territorialising strategy with transnational terrorist action (mainly within the Muslim world), the Islamic State tends to emphasize the re-territorialising aspect.<sup>16</sup> Establishing a real caliphate thus becomes more important than the geographically rather abstract reuniting of the *umma*.

Audrey Kurth Cronin, an American observer, writes that "if ISIS is purely and simply anything, it is a pseudo-state led by a conventional army."<sup>17</sup> Loretta Napoleoni shares this conviction when she writes that "the Islamic State shares in the ambitious goals of the founders of the European nation state, articulating these goals in a contemporary and modern way."<sup>18</sup> In practice, this means that IS controls a large territory with a population of about eight million people, as well as controlling a large number of oil fields, from which it derives financial resources. The Islamic State behaves, in other words, like a state: it levies taxes and provides social services, has its own currency, maintains public order, and engages in nation-branding and public diplomacy. In analytical terms, it makes

sense to consider the Islamic State as a proto-state that also uses terrorist tactics. Note, however, that for the time being the Islamic State above all is a fragile, *de facto* state. In order to become a *de jure* state, the group would have to be recognised as such by the international community, which is not about to happen, precisely because it uses terrorist tactics. The extensively mediated decapitations are a shocking illustration of this.

It cannot be excluded that some individuals travel to Syria as a result of a “pathological” fascination with violence. Committing monstrous violence then becomes a goal in itself. To the extent that foreign fighters do in fact commit such acts of violence, or get to witness them, this is also reason, should they eventually return, for concern and psychological support. It is, however, useful to put this “barbaric violence” in its wider, proto-state context in order to gain a better understanding of the current manifestation of the “radicalization” phenomenon, including the continuous departure of people for Syria.<sup>1</sup> Most of the Flemish Syrian combatants, after all, are actively involved in a civil war, fighting with the militias of this proto-state created on a strict religious and totalitarian model. Girls, women and families also leave for this proto-state. They are traveling to the caliphate, more so than joining a terrorist group. This is why a recent report correctly refers to “the migration” of Western women to territory controlled by the Islamic State. Their objective is to go and live in a country where they can practise their religion in its purest form.<sup>19</sup> They often legitimize the violence of male combatants – the muhajheddin – but do not feel the urge to follow their example themselves.<sup>20</sup>

These girls and women mainly see opportunity to make a real contribution to the state-building project as mothers, nurses and teachers. Others express themselves in more lofty terms, emphasizing the millenarian character of the Islamic State’s project and the liberating prospect of being part of it.<sup>11</sup>

Westerners – i.e. men and women, minors and adults, from Western countries – are thus participating in an “ethno-religious” and “millenarian” state-building enterprise. Some of them are committing terrorist acts within this context. Over and above the opportunity to commit violence, they consider this an *anchoring, historically significant project*. Such a project may provide an answer to a psychological need, tying in with the assumption in the Antwerp Court’s interpretation that these individuals are easy to influence, but also with a social or political need (lack of sense of citizenship, a general feeling of meaninglessness). An important point to bear in mind in any future policy – and, more broadly, in our attitudes – towards these returning combatants is that their hopes are likely to be dashed. This explains why it is important for us to adopt a humanizing, empathetic attitude towards those who left, without overlooking their moral and legal responsibility for any acts of violence they committed. This especially applies to the minors, who are, in an important sense, child soldiers in the militias of the Islamic State. The primary objective thus becomes to reintegrate them into society: in the case of these underage combatants because we are obliged to do so under international law,<sup>21</sup> and in the case of young adults because their behaviour, as described, seems to express their desire “to belong”.

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<sup>1</sup> It is said that the first groups of Belgian Syrian combatants often ended up fighting with Al-Nusra, which would appear to qualify our claim about the singular importance of the significance of the Islamic State. However, it is also worth noting that also Al-Nusra wanted to seize territory in Syria from the start. Cf. Jones, Seth. 2013. Syria’s growing jihad. *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*. 55 (4): 53-72.

<sup>11</sup> In “Lure of the Caliphate” Malise Ruthven quotes a Frenchwoman, called Adèle, who explains to her mother why she left for Syria: “It’s the end of the world, Mamaman. There is too much misery, too much injustice ... And everyone will end up in hell. Except for those who have fought with the last Imam in the Sham [i.e., Syria], except for us.” <http://nybooks.com>

A second implication follows from the above points. *A preventive radicalization policy that ignores the religious dimension and over-emphasizes the social-economic basis, or assumes religious insincerity, may ignore an important part of the phenomenon.* The religious significance of departure for the Islamic State seems to run much deeper than people typically assume.<sup>1</sup> Often, the role that religion plays in this context is minimized by focussing on the poor theological knowledge of these Jihadis. But religious worship cannot be reduced to theology:<sup>22</sup> it is also expressed in (a need for) rites, piety and worship as part of a church community - in the broad meaning of the word. The beliefs and the practice of these Syrian combatants are clearly religious in this latter sense.<sup>23</sup> The fact that the religious-geographical discourse of the Islamic State also has a strong anchoring effect raises difficult questions about the interpretation of the religious dimension of the current radicalization phenomenon.

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<sup>1</sup> Others consider religion to be less significant and mainly refer to the young age of the new generation of European combatants, cf. Coolsaet, Rik. 2015. What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights From the Belgian Case. *Egmont Paper* 75. Ghent: Academia Press.



**Ila. Radicalization is a process that transcends the individual level. Groups can also radicalize. The development processes that fuel individual and group radicalization can be quite different.**

**Ilb. Religious radicalization leads to religious fundamentalism. Religious radicalization is perceived as confrontational in a secularized society. But religious radicalization does not always give rise to violence.**

In the policy discourse, radicalization is considered a major cause of terrorist violence.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the notion is identified with unbridled fanaticism or the loss of any semblance of rationality and thus linked, inherently, to terrorist acts, which are seen as barbaric. This interpretation is difficult to equate with what is generally known about how terrorism works and, more specifically, what we know about the activities of the Islamic State. According to many observers, the organization's and (most of) its members' actions, including those of the foreign combatants, are instrumentally rational.<sup>24</sup> This fact shows how important it is to be careful in defining the key concept of any radicalization policy, not in the least because the significance we attribute to radicalization will define the objectives of the preventive policy – and the normative boundaries it imposes.

Minister Homans's concept paper, for instance, focuses on the "prevention of radicalization processes, which may lead to extremism and terrorism."<sup>25</sup> This description contains an ambiguity. It suggests that the policy's objective is not only to prevent extremism and terrorism but also to prevent radicalization as such. The name of the Flemish Parliament Committee – the "Committee for Combating Violent Radicalization" – does not fully escape that ambiguity, in spite of the many assertions during the hearings - some made by MPs - that radicalization can be a positive driving force for necessary social reform. European policy-makers use *definitions that define radicalization in terms of an anti-democratic stance and the preparedness to engage in violence.*<sup>11</sup> This does not allow for a positive valuation of the term or the phenomenon. As pointed out already, it is important to be clear about these distinctions. Definitions have consequences and they influence policy choices.

Radicalization means "to become radical". Deradicalization means that you leave radicalism behind. You can become radical in your ideas, convictions and lifestyle choices. Radicalization is not limited to religious groups. Jonathan Israel wrote an important book about the "radical enlightenment"<sup>26</sup> while sociologists have earlier highlighted the emergence of radical fractions within the African-American civil rights movement.<sup>27</sup> In the current debates, radicalization is typically explained as a process that individuals undergo, and which, as a consequence, is measured at the level of the individual respondent.

Organizations can also radicalize. This process is difficult to reduce to the individual level, but may be explained by reference to a dynamic process of group formation. Gradually, splinter groups are formed within a movement. They seek to reassert the *raison d'être* of the movement and to protect it, because they feel that the wider movement is undermining it.

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<sup>1</sup> There is much scepticism in scientific literature about the analytical value of the term radicalization. Comp. Sedgwick, Mark. 2010. The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22 (4): 479-494.

<sup>11</sup> The Danish intelligence service, for example, has defined radicalization as "a process whereby an individual is increasingly prepared to use undemocratic or violent means, including terrorism, in an attempt to achieve a specific political or ideological goal." Comp. Schmidt, Alex. 2013. Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review. *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) Research Paper*, p. 12.MG

Religious radicalization exists at the individual and at the organizational or movement level. An individual can fall under the spell of a radical interpretation of a religious doctrine. It has been said that conversions and converts have a tendency towards radical forms of religious worship.<sup>28</sup> Non-converts may also fall under the same spell. In the context of individual (religious) radicalization, it may be relevant to link this to an unstable personal identity or to individual moments of crisis, although this is not always necessary. When an organization radicalizes, however, this usually happens, as already mentioned, in a social context that is characterized by competition between various sects or fractions. This process cannot be reduced to the sum of several, individual personal crises: it is an irreducible social phenomenon. If identity building is involved, then the identities are group identities, and by consequence this becomes a complex game of mutual “identity attribution”. To the extent that this process involves an individual identity crisis, this is not so much because the individual lacks psychological resilience. Instead, the individual may perhaps experience a discrepancy between his or her self-image - which may be positive, and the identity that is attributed to him or her, when this is negative or when he/she does not recognize himself/herself in it.<sup>29</sup> In short, the mechanisms and processes that fuel individual and collective radicalization are quite different in nature.

Radicalization describes a process. In a religious context, such a radicalization process will lead to so-called *fundamentalism*.<sup>30</sup> Malise Ruthven stresses that “fundamentalism” is a product of modernity: it involves resorting to certainty in a secularizing context. Traditional religious worship does not need to be fundamental because its essence is not questioned, nor is it under pressure. As already explained, radicalization always takes place within a social context.

The fundamentalism that incites people to travel to Syria today, and to commit acts of violence, is usually defined as *salafism*. Salafism is a “sect”, a religious splinter movement, within Sunni Islam. Without hazarding a theological interpretation, it is possible to distinguish three forms of salafism along a political axis: a quietist, a political and a Jihadi strain. Each of these forms of salafism may be interpreted as a product of radicalization: if not a product of individual radicalization – as when one is born into a salafist environment - then still of sectarian radicalization. However, not every form of salafism can be *inherently* associated with the choice to commit acts of violence. On the contrary even. *A quietist salafist will reject violence because it is irreconcilable with a salafist ethical framework. It is true that quietist salafism can serve as a step up to the political or Jihadi variants; but it is doubtful whether there is an inherent drive to evolve in that direction.*<sup>31</sup> Whether quietist salafism constitutes a societal problem is another question, however. Quietism inherently means choosing to withdraw from the turbulent world around you, and quietist salafism is characterised by an urge to withdraw into one’s own group. In the European context a tendency towards (self-)segregation has been observed.<sup>32</sup>

The above analysis aims to explain the meaning of the central concept – “radicalization” – in any radicalization policy. We have already distinguished between the radicalization of an individual and the radicalization of groups. We also argued that religious radicalization refers to a process resulting in religious fundamentalism, which in turn can give rise to societal challenges. However, it does not have to imply any form of violence.

To provide specific content for a Flemish radicalization policy, we need to make three points based on the outline above.

*A first point* relates to the role that quietist salafists can play in the prevention of extremism and terrorism. Müller et.al. wrote the following on this: “In manchen Fallen mögen sie bessere Chancen haben, junge Leute vom Weg in die Radikalisierung zurückzuholen als zeitgemässere Theologien.”<sup>33</sup>

This proposal goes much further than involving former Jihadis in deradicalization programmes. In this case, that is, the focus is not on cultivating doubt, as is the case with involving former Jihadis. Instead we accept that these young people and young adults are on a quest for irreversible certainties. To date, Flanders - unlike Berlin for example - has largely chosen not to work too much with radical Muslim groups.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of whether this means the government is losing an opportunity to achieve something, it is important to realize that it shows the policy-makers are not merely concerned about whether people choose extremism or terrorism. Instead they are, consciously or otherwise, focusing on a broader social phenomenon, namely (religious) radicalization.

*A second point* concerns the extent to which policy-makers wish to focus on the religious radicalization of Muslims. Given the urgency of the Syrian problem, such a focus is easy to understand. The analysis of the current Syria challenge, as detailed in the previous reflection, has also shown that we need to pay attention to the religious dimension. *An explicit focus on “Muslim radicalization” has at least the merit of being honest. At a more practical level, it can also ensure that aid is given to target groups that have not been reached so far.*<sup>35</sup> There is, however, an intrinsic double peril in such an approach. One is that the “Muslim community” will continue to be perceived as a “suspect community”, a stigma that already partly surrounds it. A second, related danger which the Government of Flanders’ concept paper also warns against is the “culturalization” of this problem.<sup>36</sup> Religion is a transcultural human practice. Fundamentalism occurs in all religions. Radicalization is not limited to a religious context.

*A third point* follows from the above conclusion that any form of radicalization develops within a wider social-political context. Radicalization at the group or movement level cannot be reduced to the sum of several individual radicalization processes. Instead it is the expression of the dynamics between groups – “minority groups vis-à-vis majority groups” and “sects versus other sects”. These conclusions imply that the development of individual therapeutic programmes, or the cultivation of individual resilience, are not sufficient. We also need to think of ways of channelling this societal process. Schools and youth associations can play an important role in this, as has already become clear during the hearings. But we should also think about the organization and structure of (possibly local) societal consultation mechanisms.

**III. While social deprivation may have an impact on radicalization, no direct cause and effect has been established. The integration paradox exists but it does not eliminate the influence of social deprivation. At first glance, the integration paradox lies in the fact that highly skilled, relatively well-off young adults decide to participate in the Jihad. But the real integration paradox is that involvement in society actually manifests itself as isolation.**

Although the hearings of the Committee for Combating Violent Radicalization also looked at the radicalization problem in strict security terms, most attention focused on the role that education, welfare and (religious) civil society can play in the prevention of radicalization. Some experts and MPs pointed out the importance of root causes and breeding grounds. Discrimination in the labour market, (various forms of) latent racism within society, and continuing social-economic inequality were often cited, although their influence was sometimes also down-played. In any event, the emphasis was on taking preventive initiatives within the scope of Flemish competences, an approach that was also confirmed in Minister Homans's concept paper.

A preventive policy seeks to respond to the causes of radicalization, with the aim of forestalling (undesirable forms of) radicalization so that people will not even consider the option of choosing terror. There are operational and structural forms of prevention. Operational prevention is aimed at preventing actual acts of violence. Structural prevention aims to eliminate the breeding grounds for extremism. The structural prevention of extremism is designed to eliminate social inequality or injustices that may explain radicalization and the choice of extremism. Within its competences, the Government of Flanders' role in terms of operational prevention is limited, although the complex discussion on re-defining professional secrecy and confidentiality in education and welfare work must be seen against the backdrop of an operational preventive strategy. Such an intervention also has an impact on structural-preventive initiatives, to the extent that a re-definition of professional secrecy and confidentiality may potentially have consequences for the relationship of trust between welfare workers or teachers and young people, as well as undermining the trust that young (Muslims) have in society and the government.

"Social inequality or injustice" continues to be a broad concept. This gave rise to some disturbance in the Flemish debate during the hearings of the Committee for combating violent radicalization, further exacerbated when someone suggested that the radicalization phenomenon was characterised by an "integration paradox". An explanation that merely focuses on social-economic deprivation is not sufficient, given that high-skilled young adults from a middle class background have also left for Syria.<sup>37</sup> This premise – which was introduced as a hypothesis – caused consternation during and after the hearings. Some academics agreed;<sup>38</sup> a local official, involved with radicalization policy, however, insisted that only a small minority of Syrian combatants came from wealthy families.<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly enough, the discussion about "causality" was often linked to a debate about "guilt" and "responsibility". The hypothesis of the integration paradox was used as an opportunity to launch a debate about individual responsibility versus societal responsibility. But this is an inadequate appropriation. The basic sociological conclusion that social structures can influence individual chances, choices and behaviours does not release people at any point from their individual, moral responsibility. The denial of individual responsibility based on social analysis deprives people of their independent self-ownership, as well as denying the significance of their actions.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, recognising individual responsibility does not mean that social inequality, injustice or trends cannot influence people's choices, or that policy-makers cannot try to influence these social factors. A lot will then depend on how exactly the influence of the social

context on radicalization is understood. The hypothesis of the integration paradox is part of this broader question.

It is impossible to solve this empirical issue – namely, what is the exact relationship between an individual’s social-economic status and the individual odds on radicalization - without the relevant data. But ultimately, even if the relevant data are available, these findings require a theoretical explanation. In human processes, causality only exists through the way in which we theorize a specific relationship. When applied to the “integration paradox”, there are a number of points worth highlighting.

- (1) In scientific research, causality is almost always a probabilistic factor. The fact that there also highly-skilled Muslims does not refute the fact that Muslims more frequently feel the impact of social deprivation than non-Muslims. The available data illustrate this. Nor does the fact that some Syrian combatants come from families that are relatively well-off mean, under probabilistic reasoning, that social-economic deprivation is not a risk factor increasing the chances of individual radicalization.
- (2) Causes, i.e. causal factors, can never explain individual behaviour. Even if deprivation is a risk factor and an individual scores highly for this factor, you can still not explain why someone actually decides to do something - i.e. to join a religious group, or commit an act of violence. There are so-called “reasons” between the “cause” and the “action”. The reasons are the stories that individuals tell – about themselves, about their role or place in the world, about this world – and which motivate their behaviour. The integration paradox soon becomes redundant when you focus on the vital role of reasons in the explanation of social behaviour.
  - a. A “highly-skilled, well-off” individual may feel involved in the fate of the community with which he or she identifies. Historically speaking, resistance movements have always been led by high-skilled individuals who adopted more radical points of view, at least at the intellectual level.<sup>41</sup>
  - b. Another narrative mechanism that may intervene between “deprivation” and “individual action” is that of “expectations and disappointment”. Highly-educated individuals have higher expectations, which they consider legitimate - and rightly so. As a result, they tend to feel more disappointed when these expectations are not fulfilled. It is not unusual for individuals, in such a case, to exchange “legitimate” objectives and resources for “illegitimate” objectives and resources.<sup>42</sup> The anchoring project of the Islamic State, which is a historically significant project in the eyes of its supporters, gains a large part of its significance from this context: it offers an alternative goal for individuals whose legitimate expectations were not fulfilled. Experiences of discrimination (whether in the labour market, in interaction with the police, in education) become meaningful in this context, as they seem to demonstrate that not everyone has access to legitimate resources.
- (3) An analysis of specific actions must start from the reasons, i.e. the narratives that individuals weave around their own behaviour. In that sense, it is worth reiterating that religious narratives – which often are formulated in a rather archaic manner – have a prominent presence in these narratives. The prominent place of the religious discourse can be explained from a historical-materialistic perspective. Such religious awakening is clearly localized, with a high concentration often found in segregated and underprivileged neighbourhoods where social-political mobilization has turned into religious mobilization. This process can then be interpreted as a coping strategy – yet again, a consequence of disappointment and dashed expectations. Historically speaking, this is a plausible interpretation. At the same time, however, this analysis fails to acknowledge the possibility



that religious worship itself is important for these individuals. As an interpretation, it may uncritically conclude that eliminating material social inequality and injustice will reduce the lure of religious radicalization.

The above analysis suggests that trying to eliminate structural inequality and injustice may be useful and have intrinsic value. However, it cannot be the only component of a specific radicalization policy. The elimination of social deprivation and discrimination is a vital social objective; but radicalization as a process involves much more than “a response to deprivation”. As a process, it has autonomous dynamics that cannot be attributed to the causal influence of deprivation. The real paradox lies in the fact that radicalization – which, as was often underlined during the hearings, is physically expressed in isolation and the shutting out of one’s family and environment – conceals a large element of involvement in society. Radicalization is a form of resistance, and this seems to be all the more the case in highly-educated radicalized individuals.<sup>43</sup> Once again this shows that a more productive channelling of their participation in society – with the probability that this will have some kind of dissident character – is the real challenge.

**IV. A radicalization policy unfolds within society as a whole and will influence how this society – and specific target groups within it, including the policy’s primary target audience – is mobilized around the phenomenon of radicalization. We cannot exclude that well-intentioned initiatives may give rise to counterproductive results.**

A policy can only be efficient if it is accepted by those who are subjected to it. During the hearings of the Committee for combating violent radicalization, it was frequently suggested that the target audience of the Flemish radicalization policy – and people often think of young Muslims in this context – distrust the government’s authority, often because of previous negative interactions with the police and other government representatives. Youth work is seen as an important, mediating link between the government and these young people. In that context it will come as no surprise that youth workers are keen to preserve a relationship of trust and are reluctant to re-brand their activities as part of radicalization policy. While broad layers of the population expect the government to devise solutions for the problem of radicalization, some population groups consider the government to be an important part of the radicalization problem.

A radicalization policy is “performative” in the sense that it not only aims to provide a solution to a manifest problem, but also has broader social consequences. The performative nature of a radicalization policy is reflected more particularly in how far it directly “contributes to mobilising the population around the theme” of radicalization.<sup>44</sup> But the population is not a monolithic group. The primary target audience of this policy will react to the policy differently, and the nature of further mobilization around the theme of radicalization will probably be different in this group compared with the rest of the population. The former group must be dealt with because of the sense of urgency, and here the point is not to take counterproductive measures. The second group probably floats between feelings of concern, indifference and unease. The response to statements like that of Rotterdam’s mayor Aboutaleb – who suggested that anyone who did not agree with the way in which Dutch society functions was free to leave – are a good indicator of this mix of public emotions.

The level of social unease surrounding the radicalization phenomenon is significant and extends beyond the understandable fear of physical attacks. One of the merits of the hearings was that almost every intervention – whether by speakers or MPs – started from the assumption that Syrian combatants are a product of our own society. To the extent that radicalization expresses hopelessness or perceived despair, it must be countered with hope, prospects for the future, and more generally with a programme for a shared, inclusive society. The committee also agreed that discrimination – in the labour market, in education and in contacts with the police – is a reality that can no longer be tolerated. The committee clearly stated that the radicalization problem originates in our own society.

Nonetheless, there were times when the “ownership” of the problem was under pressure. While radicalization was still understood as a challenge for us to grapple with,, the causes were partly sought outside of our own society and speakers also highlighted the “new” and “unknown” nature of the issue. Testimony given during the hearings on the themes of education and welfare revealed that first-line workers are still loathe to act, because these often secular professionals do not have the right vocabulary or the right reference framework to deal with the religious aspect of their clientele’s problems. They experienced the religious dimension as alien to their world. Speakers often stressed how important it is that we strengthen the “intercultural” competences of care workers. During the hearings on diversity, a number of speakers also drew attention to the negative influence of foreign Islamic movements in Flemish mosques. They went so far as to argue that the time has come to develop a European, or even a Flemish, Islam. Without wishing to deny the influence of Saudi and other foreign financiers, it is remarkable that also this argument contributes to externalizing the problem of radicalization.

Large parts of the population probably externalize radicalization to an even greater extent. They consider “radicalization” – especially as a social phenomenon – as an alien object, “a thing” in our society but not of our society and that has no place in it. They perceive radicalization as much more than a step up to terrorist violence. They do not see it simply as a process that an individual undergoes: rather, for them it is part of a broader, social process that they “know” from iconic images – long beards, men in djellabas, women wearing a niqab – and which they may associate with other observations such as reports of holocaust denial and the rejection of the theory of evolution. For people living in those cities that are most affected by the phenomenon of radicalization, whether locals or immigrants, this perception is fuelled by direct observations. While their direct experiences may add nuance, as background reports in the media potentially can, they may also work to confirm preconceptions insofar as their experience of their own city unfolds within a largely or partly segregated context. It is likely that people will feel uneasy about radicalization – as an alien object in society – and this unease needs to be acknowledged.

Even if the Committee for combating violent radicalization is right to adopt an avant-garde position – taking as its point of departure the fact that radicalization is home-grown – it needs to acknowledge this unease, from which it is not fully exempt either. Our society, increasingly viewed as “superdiverse”, is in a process of “settling” and the government plays an important role in overseeing this process. The extensive debates about the recognition of mosques and the organization of training programmes for imams, as well as the possible establishment of citizenship classes in secondary education, assume their true significance in this context, rather than in a context of operational prevention. The question remains how to put these initiatives into practice without further exacerbating segregation and alienation – of any of the parties involved. There is always a risk of “counterproductivity”, and not only in terms of preventing the radicalization of individuals.

Perhaps the most difficult exercise involves developing counter-narratives, precisely because this is a conscious performative act that aims to manipulate people’s opinions about radicalization, religion, society and democracy. It seems rather strange to refer to counter-narratives when it is the government that develops them, since a counter-narrative can only exist in relation to a dominant or master narrative.<sup>45</sup> The government connects with dominant groups in society, articulating (and legitimising) the dominant narrative in the process. Oppressed groups can acquire some degree of freedom by developing a counter-narrative in which they claim power and a future for themselves; they may also develop a counter-narrative as a form of resistance, contesting the dominant interpretation of social reality. When developing a counter-narrative to the narrative of the Islamic State (often called “propaganda”), we must realize that these young people consider the discourse of the Islamic State itself (or of other groups such as Sharia4Belgium) as a counter-narrative. The assessment that Jihadism is a youth culture points in the same direction, as this is a clearly subversive youth culture. The risk is thus that if the government counters with its own narrative, this may be considered hypocritical and have a counterproductive effect.

Notwithstanding these considerations, the Government of Flanders probably cannot but become involved in this field. But if it decides to venture into this “communicative” field, it needs to be aware of the pitfalls. We offer four reflections here:

(1) counter-narratives in the deradicalization phase will be different from counter-narratives in the preventive phase. This term probably should only be used for the latter form. Deradicalization, especially when the individual in question has spent a substantial amount of time in a war zone, requires a therapeutic approach, as Erik de Soir explained during the hearings. Such a therapeutic context requires appropriate therapeutic methods, whereas a counter-narrative is primarily developed on the public level;

(2) the development and implementation of counter-narratives will always face a dilemma of legitimacy. Legitimate spokespeople for the counter-narrative, as seen by the

government, may not be considered as such in the eyes of the target audience. In fact, establishing this legitimacy will only be complicated by the fact that the counter-narrative is associated with the government.

(3) care must be taken over the sincerity of the narratives. If the target audience perceives a discrepancy between words and actions, this will only contribute to alienation and radicalization. This applies to any discourse about our own society (e.g. an inclusive society versus discrimination), as well as to the effort to engage in public diplomacy. Public diplomacy, whereby a government directly addresses the population of another country, is easily considered propaganda if the actual foreign policy is too far removed from the public diplomatic discourse.

(4) the government can only keep control over the “play of narratives” (who, what, how), and by extension the process of societal development, to a limited extent. Flanders is an open society, in a dual sense. It is embedded in the world as a whole and will always be influenced by that world. It is also an open society insofar as it provides a platform, or in any event aspires to do so, for different opinions. Part of the Flemish counter-narrative should therefore focus on hearing and recognising dissident counter-narratives “against” Flanders. The cultivation of citizenship, of rhetorical skills and listening skills, is a prerequisite for this. Insofar as the Flemish educational system and (local) governments help to implement such practices, Flanders will need to focus less on developing counter-narratives, and more on indirectly facilitating the development of narratives that are outwith the government’s own control.

### **3 Suggestions for a policy-oriented research agenda**

The sense of urgency about the phenomenon of radicalization is keenly felt at this time. Local governments are calling for more (financial) support. The Government of Flanders has implemented a first series of initiatives and is currently preparing to develop them further. Parliament has recently agreed on a draft resolution, advising the government on the content of its radicalization policy. At the same time, most people agree that the problem of radicalization is here to stay – at least for a while yet. At all events, the above analysis and the hearings clearly show that there is still some uncertainty on certain points about what needs to be solved, and which solutions work best. Further research is needed, not to delay the implementation of policy initiatives, but rather to inform the further development of Flemish radicalization policy. The government's aim to elaborate a research agenda on radicalization is therefore commendable.

Based on the above analysis and in line with the research-focused perspective that befits a research institution, we have identified five important directions for further policy-oriented research. The list below is by no means an exhaustive one.

A first group of proposals aims to further refine our empirical understanding of the phenomenon of radicalization and the potential social repercussions of a radicalization policy. A second group is aimed at providing more practical support for the development or recalibration of specific instruments for radicalization policy in Flanders.

#### ***The motives and legitimizing stories of migrants to the Islamic State, of combatants and of those who stay home.***

Throughout this analysis we have underscored the importance of knowing and understanding the reasons that Syrian combatants give for their departure. We have already suggested that the religious dimension must be given its correct place within this frame. The prominent presence of a religious discourse and religious trappings motivated us not to dismiss the importance of religion out of hand. If we want to correctly value the motives of Syrian combatants, then assumptions must be tested against empirical data. Their legitimizing stories must be compared with the discourse of those who stayed home but also were radicalized. Based on this information, we can gain a better understanding of the primary policy object of any radicalization policy.

#### ***Young people's perception of radicalization and radicalization policy***

Many young people, especially in the primary target audience for a preventive radicalization policy, distrust the government. A policy against radicalization risks exacerbating this sense of distrust. It is worth examining these young people's perception of policy precisely because a radicalization policy contributes to raising awareness of radicalization, often through unintended effects. Research among young people, especially in areas where the problem of radicalization is significant, can help us understand how radicalization and radicalization policy can create new societal fault lines.



### ***The potential and limitations of counter-narratives and public diplomacy***

Some have suggested that the government must develop counter-narratives to these radical voices, especially given the strong communications performance of the Islamic State and other radical Islamic groups, i.a. on the Internet. On the international level, the need for more public diplomacy has been raised. At the same time there is a significant risk of counter-productive initiatives, especially in these areas. That is why it is worth examining whether and how the government can provide meaningful support for shaping such initiatives.

### ***Collecting and evaluating foreign initiatives***

Radicalization is not a typically Flemish problem: it has reared its head in several European countries. Flemish policy can draw inspiration from previous foreign initiatives or from initiatives by the French-language community. Experts have frequently referred to specific foreign initiatives, such as the Aarhus programme in Denmark and the Hayat project in Germany, as examples to follow. However, it was never made wholly clear during the hearings what these programmes entailed, or what the positive evaluation of them was based on. Some of these well-reputed programmes should therefore be studied in more detail. Special attention should be paid in this context to the opinion of first-line workers and the target audience of these programmes. It is also important to understand the limitations of these programmes and the negative experiences gained.

### ***The reform of professional secrecy and confidentiality in education, youth and welfare work and the consequences for the relationship of trust***

A preventive radicalization policy places high expectations on welfare workers, youth workers and teachers. They are tasked with the operational prevention of radicalization and extremism, and are asked to engage in early detection and structural prevention as they help shape the future of our society on a daily basis. Often these individuals sense a tension between these two forms of involvement under a radicalization policy. The proposals for a reform of professional secrecy and confidentiality obligations have only made things worse, as this reform is sometimes seen as a step to improve operational prevention. At the same time, it is detrimental to structural prevention because it puts the relationship of trust between professionals and young people under pressure. A detailed study of this dilemma, looking both at the legal aspects and the experiences and viewpoints of all stakeholders involved, may help to clarify the use, the benefits and disadvantages of potential policy choices.

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