Deradicalization and Community Outreach and Engagement:

A counter- narrative for how to build a better life.

By Lea Baroudi

Countering Violent Extremism is the topic of the year. However experts around the world are still baffled as to what it means, what it entails exactly, what should be the difference between CVE and Counter-terrorism and how much community engagement and outreach it should include. First, before I go into the importance of community engagement in deradicalizing youth and challenging extremism, I think its very important to address the WHY. Why are people and especially youth getting "radicalized". There are probably many various reasons to that, and these reasons vary from country to country, region to region, even neighborhood to neighborhood and family to family sometimes. Youth in the west for example are probably influenced by different types of drivers than youth in the Middle East, so I will talk about our own experience, focusing on the Northern capital of Lebanon, Tripoli.

Tripoli is Lebanon's second largest city after the capital Beirut and is severely underdeveloped and has been affected for years by a tough security situation and sectarian and political tensions and clashes. Available statistics show that 85% of its population live in deprivation, one-third of which in extreme poverty. Two deeply impoverished neighbourhoods, divided along political and sectarian lines, have experienced dozens of instances of violent conflict between the Sunnis of bab el tebbeneh and qobbeh and the Alawites of Jabal Mohsen.

Residents of the two neighbourhoods have been rivals since

the Lebanese civil war and are divided not only along sectarian lines but also by their opposition or support to the Syrian Regime in place. This situation was further exacerbated by the crisis in Syria as of 2011, when warring factions there found these two neighbourhoods, divided by a street ironically called Syria Street, a fertile ground for extremist recruitment.

In January 2015, shortly after the guns were silenced in Tripoli, we organized auditions for over a hundred young men and women from Jabal Mohsen and Bab El Tebbeneh, initially Sixteen of those interviewed (eight from each side) were selected. Their profile was the same: they were aged 16-25, they had abandoned school very early, most of them had participated in the fighting, and all of them were poor and unemployed. That profile, sad to say, was not difficult to find…

The idea was simple really: write and produce a comedy play based on their lives, that was to be performed by these would-be actors all over Lebanon.

The recruitment part was the first and possibly hardest step. I still recall the surreal experience standing at the door of the makeshift rehearsal hall with my team performing body searches on religiously conservative, hardened fighters to make sure they were unarmed. Knives, guns, even a grenade were confiscated.

The mood was tense: These were men who lived separate lives, saw each other as enemies, and had fought each other across the dividing line separating their neighborhoods. Some had been carrying a gun since they were as young as 15. The word “reconciliation’’ was never mentioned as a desired outcome in front of the group.

Persuading the recruits to stick to the rehearsals was tough. “I’ve never been to a play and you want me to act in one,” one of them said once, unable to fathom he could perform on stage or that anyone cared enough to watch him perform.

That one sentence is a clue to a lot of what is at issue. The purpose of the play was twofold — to give the young men a sense of worth, and to channel their anger and grievances into a useful pursuit.
The play became a local take on *Romeo and Juliet*, inspired by the lives of the actors themselves. At first the young men — and a few women — had a hard time believing their lives could inspire anything, let alone a play. Then they began to come around to the idea.

The project that started with 16 youth quickly grew, other plays were produced with a bigger number of people, rap groups were created, graffiti artists, …all expressing their frustrations about the conditions they live in along with their hope and dreams through art. It was not only the participants themselves who felt heard, but the audience from the two neighborhoods who watched them perform.. they were becoming their activists the ones who are getting their voices heard to different audiences to the media to the rest of Lebanon… A cultural café also opened its doors on the former front lines managed by some of our participants and month long cultural festival was just wrapped up on its premises.
The next step was to widen the circle of people who had a stake in maintaining the calm in the area, while creating further employment opportunities. So we just raised funds to help with the rehabilitation of the main street dividing the two areas, ironically named Syria Street. All the painters, carpenters, and metalworkers who would be needed for the project are youth coming from the area, and we are currently working to train and recruit 40 people from the two neighborhoods to do the work.
The numerous stories these youngsters accepted to share with us during this experience are touching. Allow me to give two examples: the story of Atriss and the story of Ali:

Atriss is a 24 year old Sunni. He is Lebanese, but his parents had failed to officially register him with the authorities at his birth. That means he has no right to social security, to health care, to get married, or to work… he has no right to anything, he doesn't exist. And thousands are like him in Tripoli, due to poverty and ignorance.
Atriss is unemployed. Members of his family got arrested several times for their "ostentatiously" religious appearance, their homes were broken into and they were strip-searched. His brother fell from a building on the job (he was illegally employed), lost his eyesight and the use of his legs, but the family had no money to have him treated. His 18-year old cousin joined the Islamic State (Daesh) along with his three sisters. When his father tried to get his daughters back, his son executed him.
Before joining us, Atriss had fought in Syria alongside the Free Syrian Army but later decided to join Al-Nusra Front to fight for a cause, get a wife and a "stable" job. He used to be very apologetic of Nosra in my initial conversations with him. He told me: "At least they have something to die for…" A few months ago, after we finished the first phase of our project, Atriss announced to me he was planning to flee to Germany in the illegal boats that were taking Syrian refugees. When I tried to stop him and told him it was too risky and he could die, he told me: "I have nothing to lose, we are nothing here". I ended up convincing him to wait it out another year.
Ali is a 21-year old Alawite. He is unemployed. He has never had a steady job. He is married and has a daughter. He spent his childhood on the streets where drugs were available and distributed for free, and he started popping up pills at age 15. He was then given a gun and some money to "protect" the streets and fire at his neighbors on the other side. At age 18 he was asked to go to Syria and fight alongside the Regime forces. And Ali went there, but he ran

away after two months. He said to me that, even though the drugs were for free and in abundance there, he could not withstand the atrocities he had witnessed. Before joining us, Ali had always believed that his allegiance to the Syrian Regime and his sectarian identity came first.

Most of the young people in both areas have lived more or less similar experiences.

Today Atriss and Ali, along with Tarek, Zouzou, Taha and the others, have not only become close friends and left the life of violence they grew up in, they are now busy writing and creating their sketches under our supervision, performing in their own neighborhoods, some of them are wiritn gtheir own rap songs, we are helping them produce video clips that are promoted online that vent their frustrations and those around them in an artistic, ironic and funny way.

Why am I sharing all this with you?

The message is crystal-clear: As MARCH suspected, the reasons youth in Tripoli turn to extremism are not because of extremist ideology, but because of systemic and societal push factors. These include a loss sense of belonging, perceived (or true) injustice, and poor socioeconomic situations. These have been killing any seed of hope in the hearts and minds of these young adults, making them vulnerable and more easily manipulated, leading them to resort to violence and to yield to radical ideologies.

All of these men were looking for income, but also a sense of purpose and hope in the future. Whether it’s the poor neighborhoods of Tripoli or the inner city of Chicago, a paying job is not always enough to pave the way for upward mobility or foster hope that a better life is possible. And it’s just that sort of hopelessness that extremist groups seize upon to attract new recruits.

Groups such as ISIS capitalize on these feelings to recruit members, give them a new identity, and brand them into

fighters. They are perceived as heroic, and yes also “cool” . they use social media and video clips to promote their “work” in a very heroic and even romantic kind of way.

Challenging this requires a holistic approach to provide the youth with an alternative that is “cool” yet remains angry, providing them with both the appeal and the benefit that these groups provide. (a way to vent and be heard, a sense of purpose and empowerment and an income)
This approach may not work with the hardcore Islamist leaders of any movement, whether the Islamic State or the Nusra Front. But the key is to deprive them of recruits.

Another very important point I would like to conclude with: sustainability and the role of the state: the beautiful transformation from sworn enemies to close friends I talked about, happened at a speed which obviously delighted us … but frightened us at the same time. We were delighted because we could relatively quickly achieve reconciliation through art and empowerment and activism . But we were frightened because speed could work both ways! Let us not underestimate the ease with which ordinary people can be turned into belligerent extremists when they live in conditions of poverty, deprivation, injustice, hopelessness and drug abuse.
It is therefore urgent to stop marginalizing large segments of the population, and do something about it, at a state level too: create sustainable jobs for them, push them to learn (not necessarily on school benches) provide them with social areas (cultural spaces, public parks, football fields, etc.), fight drug abuse and drug trafficking, and most importantly guarantee their basic rights and treat them like equal citizens.
Our experience has taught us that conflict resolution through community engagement may overcome the failure of politics

and politicians, but it is by no means an alternative to the State. Inciting citizenship against sectarianism is a top priority. It is high time that our decision-makers bear the responsibility of giving citizens reason not to throw themselves at sea or to wrap a suicide belt around their waists.